

Feared Fables

# Red Run

The background of the cover is a misty, blue-toned forest. A woman with blonde hair, seen from behind, wears a long, flowing red dress and looks upwards. In the lower-left foreground, two white wolves are visible; one is sitting and looking towards the viewer, while the other is partially behind it, looking towards the woman.

ISLA JONES

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# Red Run



Feared Fables

Book One

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ISLA JONES



# 1.

I draw my fur-lined hood over my head and keep my eyes on the ground beneath me. The cold season has dusted the earth with ice that crunches under my worn boots. Stares pierce through the red cloak I use as a shield and I feel each one of them. Judgement, fear—intrigue. Some are braver than others. Children come closest to me before their mothers yank them back to the wooden posts they call home. But they all come to me eventually.

In the depths of their depression and desperation, they knock on my door after sun fall. They fear me, but they beg for only what I can give them.

Hope.

The villagers call me Red.

It's not the name my mother gifted me before she took her last breath on the birthing table, it's a name that follows me along the muddy lanes of the village.

Grandmother tells me the name will forever haunt me. Doesn't 'haunt' suggest an unwanted presence, I wonder? It's not entirely unwanted. As an orphaned pariah, I won't be forced into a marriage with a repugnant village man, and I can do what I please—so long as I don't upset Priest Peter who mostly pretends I don't exist.

I am Red, because of the colour I wear—the colour of my cloak, the colour of my lips, and the colour smeared over me when I return from the woods.

I hunt the animals. Their blood stains my hands and face. Of that, I am proud.

Not many of the other villagers hunt. Fear traps them inside the tall wooden walls that circle our corner of the land. But I venture out each morn with my bag of traps slung over my shoulder, a knife in my boot between the leather and my stocking, and a spear in my gloved hand.

This morn is no different.

Ahead, the log-wood gates part for me before I even reach them. The village guard, Thomas, gives me a stiff smile. At least he tries, but he can't keep the unease from crinkling the corners of his eyes.

I make to venture out into the cold woods alone. But the creak of the gates behind me doesn't go for as long as normal. I turn around to see Abigail rush at me, her eyes wild.

Before she can ask, I glower at her from beneath my hood. My voice is firm and my eyes cold; "No."

Thomas hesitates behind the blue-cloaked woman, but doesn't shut the gates. He tries to listen, to suck out the hint of village-gossip that he senses.

"Please," begs Abigail. She's so desperate, she doesn't bother to draw up her hood when talking to me. Others through the gates see her—they look and watch. But Abigail cares naught. "I ask only for one more—that is all, Red. I swear it, one more and I shall never darken your path again."

I want to correct her, to tell her it's 'darken your doorstep', but I catch myself. We're not on my doorstep. We're on my path.

Clever girl. Too clever to beg for what she thinks she needs.

"You said that last time, and the time before that," I tell her.

Abigail cries out. She has always been this dramatic. It's almost amusing to me until she drops to her knees and clasps her hands up at me—in prayer.

I blanch and look at the village to see if Priest Peter is watching. He isn't, but the tension in my shoulders doesn't unwind.

"Get up," I bark. "Get up, Abbie. People are seeing you like this."

Abigail cries again, but words twist her wails; "I beseech you, Red! I shall pay six shillings—you know I have it! One more, I need one more and that is all!"

I crouch before her, my brown eyes cold and sharp under the shadow of my hood. "Why? What is it you need this poison for?"

Abigail snivels. "You wouldn't understand...You'll never understand."

I sigh and turn my eyes on Thomas. He inches closer, but stops when he sees my gaze on him. He gulps and slinks back to the gate.

“You are engaged to be married,” I say.

Abigail jerks her gaze up at me. “How do you know?”

“It’s what you all ask for when the wedding night approaches.” I stand and flick the bottom of my coat where snow has gathered. “Come to me tonight. After sundown.”

Abigail staggers to her feet. Behind those teary eyes sparkles hope. “You mean it?”

My gaze levels with hers. “Bring one pound.”

I ask for a lot. One pound is the most a maidservant could hope to earn in a year. But Abigail’s family own the tavern—a pound is much to them, but not too much to hurt their livelihood.

She nods, and it’s the last moment of my morn I grant her before I sweep away up the path and into the snowy forest.

The gate groans shut behind me.

Once I hear it bolt in place, I feel the familiar sharp embrace of the woods.



## 2.

Grandmother prefers the woods to the village. Sometimes when the night is coldest and quietest, I cannot understand why. Loneliness *haunts* me in the village at times. Still, there are days that I understand Grandmother's choice to be apart from the fools within the wooden walls.

Today I come across the biggest, greatest fool of all.

As I hike up the path to Grandmother's cabin, I catch sight of his trap: A wire that hangs from a wooden pike and ends in a noose, ready to snare and strangle any rabbit that runs through it to reach the sprinkle of lettuce on the other side.

My lips pinch together as I near the trap and, with a curt glance at the trees enveloping me, I crouch down beside it.

From my boot, I fish out my knife and grab hold of the wire-noose. Before I can cut through it, I hear the crunch of his boots behind me.

"Get away from my trap, *witch*."

He spits the word most of the villagers are too afraid to call me. One of the few reasons they call me Red instead. Fear. Though 'Red' is close to the true word that dances on their tongues, and it leaves the implications to linger.

The knife stays firm in my gloved hand; I rise and step back onto the path.

"It's a poor trap," I say, but it's a lie. He knows it.

Colton might be the only villager who can out-hunt me. But what can be expected of a blacksmith? All those materials within his reach, a shop to fashion whatever he likes, and without a penny spent, too.

"The wire will rust in this weather," I add.

It's the only point I have to support my insult. My lashes lower to a glower. Unlike the rest of the villagers, he doesn't so much as blink under the deadly cut of my stare.

Proud, he stands taller than me by a foot and some, and even lifts his chin in defiance. Colton wears the complexion of his Northern ancestry; a

soft pallor dusted with the palest of freckles, eyes so brown that when the sun dips under the moon they resemble old tree bark. A fur hat is pressed down on his auburn waves that remind me some of rusted metal darkened by sunset-orange hues.

As I drink him in, I see the corner of pinkish lips twitch, as though he might like to snarl at me.

Colton is not afraid of me.

Still, he believes me to be a witch. And it's what I use against him.

"I wish you good fortune today, hunter," I say, cruelty in my smile. "Should you need such wishes."

Colton's snarl breaks out and his eyes turn to the pots of soil I've seen them become before. Yet, he is brave and takes a hard stride closer to me, axe at his side.

"These are my hunting grounds today, witch. I have marked them with my traps." His high cheekbones grow pink from the pinch of the cold and the bite of the witch. "Off with you."

The few hunters of the village have an agreement. To put it simply, we have a 'first to arrive, first to hunt' deal among us. Colton was first to arrive, so I dip my head very slightly, then turn my back on him.

My boot barely presses into the snow before a hiss rushes by me, and I catch the metal gleam of a throwing knife.

His knife soared right by my hood.

Stunned, I turn on the hunter. He strides toward me, sheathed in brown leather gear and a wolf-fur coat. My cutting eyes follow him to where the knife landed.

Ah. He hadn't missed. He hadn't been aiming at me at all.

Colton picks up the knife by its hilt. From the point of the blade, a snake writhes. An adder snake. He doesn't gloat as he snaps the creature's neck.

I would have gloated plenty.

My eyes widen and I can feel the glow of them pushing through the shadow of my cloak. The urge to hold out my hand for the snake takes me, but I resist and rein in my excitement.

It's rare to see adders this close to the village and in this time of winter, too.

As if reading my mind, Colton says, "Its nest must have been disturbed." He turns it over in his thick, black gloves. "Female. Pregnant, it would appear."

The urge has now heightened to outright glee, and my veins tingle beneath my fair skin. "I will dispose of it," I tell him as dully as I can manage. "Hand it here."

Colton drags his gaze from my outstretched hand to my face, as if he can see everything that lurks behind the cloak's hood. The limp waves of my yellow hair, the fair skin I wear in all seasons, and the somewhat crooked nose on my face that has turned pink at the nostrils from the cold.

"You want this?" His brows arch and there it is—the cold, gloating smirk I'd anticipated. "For what? Your potions and spells?"

Silence pulls between us as I choose not to respond.

"I will give you this," he says and steps closer, "in exchange for the woods."

"They are not mine to give. The woods belong to nature."

He ignores my answer and draws closer still, only stopping when he towers before me, so close that I smell the sweetness of jam on his breath and see the shadow of stubble on his strong jawline. Though it is short hair, I notice that the orange grows stronger there than on his head.

"This adder, in exchange for first mark of the woods each morn until the day of rest."

Sunday. That is four days from now—four days of giving up first arrival to the hunting grounds. It is hardly worth it...and yet, I cannot bring myself to deny his offer on a whim or out of pride.

"It doesn't seem fair," I tell him, but my gaze burns hard on the adder.

Its venom is gold to my remedies. I could accomplish so much with that one snake, and even more with the foetuses inside of it. Adders, unlike most other snakes, don't lay eggs. For that, they are all the more interesting to me.

Colton pulls out the knife from the snake, then tucks it into its sheath. “I will bring you one rabbit each day. Now is it fair?”

I reach for the adder, and Colton doesn’t pull away. I take it and roll it up like it is a mere rope to be hung on a peg. “It is a fair offer, and I accept. But heed this warning—” I look up at him and conjure my glower again. “—should you try to trick me with your smallest rabbit, I will know, and our bargain will be at a quick end.”

By the manner of his creased lips, I know I caught his trickery. He thought he could fool me, but no one can.

“So be it.”

Colton strides out of my way and back to the rabbit’s trap. He crouches beside it to check for any damage I might have done.

Once he’s satisfied, we share a brief, cold look.

I continue my journey to Grandmother’s cabin, a sour pinch to my face.

I’m not too proud to admit that Colton is a fine hunter. He brings back the most of any of us from his days in the woods. Sometimes, he stays among the trees for days and nights, and returns only when he has a barrow full of prize. Rabbits. The occasional fox. And rarest of all, a wolf. I have yet to catch me a wolf—and shan’t for the next four days, at least.

Colton’s claim to the hunting ground burdens me greatly. When I am finished at Grandmother’s, I will return to barren woods. No boars or deer or foxes. I should be lucky to catch a mouse, and even so, there is little I can do with just one.

At least there is comfort in that the blasted hunter will bring me rabbits for the next four days. I could roast one a day or make a stew.

But then, there’s always *him* to rely on.

Dante.



### 3.

Grandmother greets me before I push through her alder-wood gate. She stands on the doorstep above potted plants and frowns at me across the icy garden. Her scraggly brown hair is noticeably greying and is fastened into a bun with a piece of twine. She wears no corset; she expects no other visitors but me, and corsets were invented by the devil. I am most positive of that.

“It is too cold a morn for wanderings in the woods, Ella,” she demands. “Come inside before you freeze your bosom off!”

At the snap of her voice, my legs move faster until I’m ducking underneath her arm and into the cabin. Warmth hits me like a blow to the face and with it comes the fragrance of my childhood. Squirrel broth and warm goat’s milk infused with crushed almonds.

“Grandmother,” I sigh, and pull off my bag. It thuds to the floor as the door shuts behind me. “You told me you have no almonds left. I needed only a handful for a loaf of bread I made.”

“Oh, hush.” Grandmother takes off my cloak and hangs it on the rack. “Never have I met a girl who burns bread like you do. And you expect me to hand over what I have left of my almonds *to you*? Silliness doesn’t become you, child.”

In her eyes, I am—and will forever be—a child to scold. Even at nineteen years of age, she treats me as though I am a toddler running through the garden still. I moved back into the village, made my own business—of sorts—and set up a house for myself, all without a husband. And still, she scolds me.

My eyes roll back as she fusses about. She cannot decide on whether to usher me to the armchair by the fire, stir the stew, pour us tankards of hot milk, or put away my things.

I drape myself over the armchair and kick off my boots.

Finally, she decides on serving up stew and says it’s because I ‘look half-frozen to death’. She means I look like a corpse. Unbecoming.

“I make it my duty to be as unbecoming as I can,” I tell her. “Otherwise, men might have ideas about me and those ideas might lead them to an ale sprinkled with belladonna.”

Grandmother tuts and shoves a hot bowl into my hands. “Just like your mother, poisoning this boy, then this one.”

I blow my cold breath onto the stew.

“It came back to her, it did,” she says. “The first man she didn’t poison, well he killed her and that’s nature for you, Ella. Take lives, and life is taken from you.”

“I killed mother,” I say, then sip from the wooden spoon. “In birth.”

“Yes, but who put you in there!” She points accusingly at the wall. “Oh, your father was the death of her. I told her to poison the foetus out of her womb before it grew too big, but she wouldn’t listen. Now, look at her.”

Her gaze goes down to the wooden floorboards, then she shakes her head.

Mother isn’t buried under the floorboards. But we make no lies of where she rests for eternity. We will join her someday.

Pointing my toes toward the heat of the fire, I ask a question I’ve had trapped in me for a while; “Did he love her?”

Grandmother blinks.

She shakes off my words as though they are bees, then sits opposite on the frayed couch. “Now why would ask such a thing, Ella? Are you having ideas?”

No, I was not. Still, a Hemlock woman can only become pregnant with a man she loves. It can be any man. A baker, a cobbler or a king. It matters only that there is a love so wild that it rattles the mind, body and soul. Mother must have loved my absent father to have had me.

Her life was taken by my very birth and I find myself wondering sometimes, was it worth it? Should she have drank a special brew and rid herself of me? Or did she risk it for love that might not have been returned?

“It was a mere question, Grandmother. No need to get your broomstick all in a twist.”

According to the ordinaries—the non-witches, non-wolves—broomsticks are a witch’s companion, the way horses are to non-witches. There isn’t much truth to it.

Still, I like the silliness of the fib.

“You visited me two morns ago,” Grandmother says. “Why this morn, too?”

Not often do I visit her more than once a week. She is a difficult old woman and she irks me. But her garden is the best in all of England, and I must have some pieces of it.

“I’ve come to tend to the garden. I should hope the valerian has blossomed some.” I place the now-empty bowl on the side table. “How is my mugwort coming along?”

Grandmother reaches out her hand and curls her fingers. She wants payment for her constant tending to the garden and my access to the plants.

I reach into my corset and pluck out a small, blue-tinted phial. “Nothing comes free from you, Grandmother. Extract of toadstool, as requested,” I say and toss it at her.

Grandmother betrays her elderly appearance and snatches the phial with a swift swipe. She uncorks it before she sniffs once. Satisfied, she tucks it into her own bosom, but I can’t imagine how safe it will be in there without a corset to keep it in place.

“What are your plans for it?” I ask.

Toadstools are fly agarics—the red and white mushrooms that grow wild all over these lands and beyond. Grandmother is capable of extracting the oil of it herself, so why she needed me to do it was a mystery that piqued my interest.

Grandmother gives me a lingering look, then closes it off with a wink. “Secrets are best kept among the dead,” she tells me as she rises from the couch. “The garden is where you left it, Ella. Stay as long as you need, but be within those village walls before sundown. You hear?”

“Loud and clear, Grandmother.”

I watch her dip through drapes to the back of the cabin. There’s a room back there, locked tight—the only door in the whole cabin that has a

lock and key.

Often, when I was a child, I'd spend hours waiting for Grandmother to emerge from the Secret Room. I'd conjured up dozens of ideas of what lurked on the other side of the door. Then, I stopped caring the night the wolf came to our neck of the woods and tore apart our garden.

Not a normal wolf...

It was the one that belonged to the village, where it stalked for prey each full moon, and never retreated until it shed blood. The day it came to the cabin, I watched it through the upstairs window, terrified. My cries called for Grandmother, but she stayed in the Secret Room for hours, long after the wolf left.

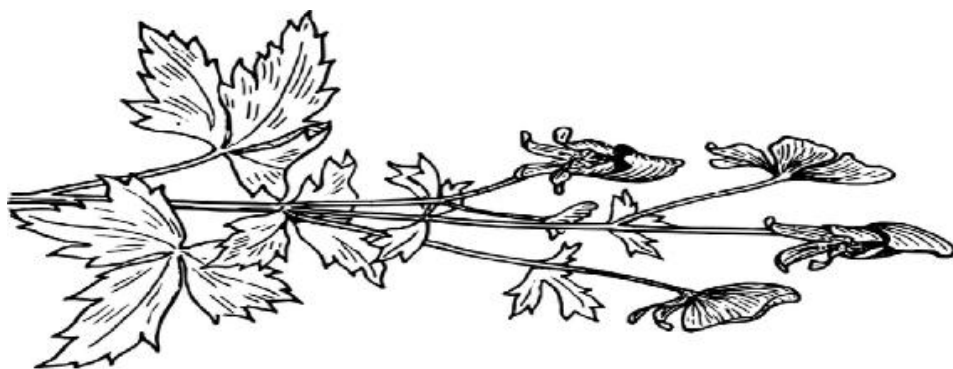
It was then that it dawned on me the way the sun dawns on the world—there could be nothing as horrible inside the Secret Room than the beast who tore apart the garden that night.

The Werewolf.

For years, no one has seen it. One full moon, it simply didn't show. And the full moon after, and the one after that.

Some think it dead. Others think it hibernates or has moved to another place.

No matter what happened to the wolf, I am glad it's gone. Still, I carry a bundle of dried and pressed wolfsbane wrapped in cloth on my person wherever I go. Just in case.



Aconitum.

Sometimes known as aconite, devil's helmet, or wolfsbane.



## 4.

The cold wind whips me so hard that I shiver under my cloak and chatter my teeth together. I'm sure my whole face has turned pink by now. Even as I coax the stems of the plants out from their roots, beneath the gloves I wear, my fingers have gone rigid and stiff. This is gentle work, and should be done with delicate movements, but I fear I have ruined the roots of the plants from my abrasive touch.

I kneel before a plot of the garden. Between me and the belladonna sits my wicker basket, half-full with wolfsbane and mugwort.

I move onto the valerian shrub and hack at it until the entire root is unearthed.

Valerian root is a fine sedative, one that unwinds the worries some of my customers harbour, and eases them into restful sleeps. It is the remedy Abigail comes to me for. Though, I suspect her need for it has gone farther than I am comfortable with. Should she become addicted ...

Well, Priest Peter won't be too pleased with me, and his displeasure is a turn that could push me out of the village and back to Grandmother's cabin. Villagers would still come to me there for their remedies and medicines.

I would lose business to those too afraid to venture through the woods, not to mention I cannot stand a full life with Grandmother, whose maternal nature had been stomped out of her by her own coarse mother.

It is our family curse.

The Hemlock women are born without the softness expected of us.

And I am no different.

Before I leave the garden, I cover my basket with a cloth and dust some of the snow away from the still-rooted plants. Grandmother takes wonderful care of them, and I realise—that is where her maternal instincts are directed. Perhaps all Hemlock women weren't born without the softness. Instead, we might have been born with a misdirected care, and it leads us to nature in its bare form.

I go back into the cabin to warm myself with a mug of spiced milk by the fire before I trek through the woods again. I peek through the drapes, but the bed is empty and the herb room to the left is without her presence.

Grandmother must be in her Secret Room.

As a fare-well, I tidy her herb room—pinching enough salt for myself and a few almonds—then leave.

On the way back to the village, I see no sign of Colton, but I spot a handful of his traps. A hare is tangled in one, as stiff as my fingers in the cold. Temptation trickles through me, and I almost reach for it. I am owed a rabbit, but a hare will do just as well.

I stop myself.

Four rabbits will come my way if I leave this hare in its trap. And those four rabbits will give me four days to brew the remedies I need. So I pass the hare, and as I go, I wonder if Colton watches me from the white of the trees, waiting for my betrayal.

It doesn't come.



Thomas is still on guard at the gate when I return. He has moved up to the watchtower and shouts down at whoever is on the other side of the gate to open up.

I slide through the gap and rush through the village. Bundles of people gather in the Square, where they trade and barter in the snow. Some of the buildings that border the Square are built from stone, and others timber, but they all wear white faces with black panels running across them. I rather think the buildings pretty—but not the straw ones near the farms at the far end of the village.

The stares don't follow me this time, or perhaps I am so frozen by the chilly air and sprinkles of snow that I hardly notice them.

I live down a lane off-street, as far from the tavern as I can afford. The noise of the drunken fools at night still reaches me, but I'm far enough that the sound blends in with the howls of wild wolves and the cries of the wind.

I unlock the door and rush inside.

Between me and the dwindling flames in the fireplace are two armchairs and a solid table with a candle-lantern on it. To my left, a ladder leads to the upper half-level where curtains hide my bed and clothes rack.

Under the second level, drapes dangle at the mouth of my prized room. Those drapes shield the most important part of my home—the space in which I prepare remedies and treat those who knock on my door after the sun falls.

My home is modest, but it is my home.

I am without a husband and children, and that comes with certain luxuries. As I push myself from the door, I drop my bag, rest the basket beside the lantern, and shrug off my cloak. My possessions are strewn about the home. Sun will fall soon, and I will have to tidy before anyone comes knocking at my door.

Tonight, I expect Abigail for the dosage of valerian and Colton to give me my rabbit.

I sigh at the mental reminder. My body and mind are tired. Should it be so unfeasible that I might have a night to myself? Apparently so.

I slide the wooden bar into its bolts to lock the door. When I first moved in, I invested in a metal lock and key, but I use them only when I leave my home to protect from invaders. While I am inside, I find that the bar works just fine.

I throw some cheap wood in the fire. Soon, I bask in a wide-reaching birth of orange light and begin to put away my things. I pull apart the drapes to my herb room and dump my basket on the bench.

Shelves are stacked all around me in this part of the home, and each holds a phial or jar of something from the garden. Oils extracted from plants, ground leaves prepared for special drinks, and even berries of the poisonous sorts are packed and stored on the shelves.

Some dried meats and herbs hang from ropes above, fruits are flattened on a wooden slab ready to be dried out, and salt is crushed in jars to better preserve foods.

Underneath the bench, I have carved a small cave to store my foods. Wrapped in paper, there are some scraps of cooked rabbit left and a shaving of ham. Oats sit in a woven bag for porridge, and a jar of nuts is tucked at

the back, but I find it best to eat the quick-to-spoil foods first. One never knows when food might dwindle.

A loaf of stale bread is closest to me.

Grandmother is right, I am atrocious at baking. It should not be stale for another day, at least. Still, I snatch it and slam it down on the worktop. It lands with a thud so loud that I hesitate. If I had stew, I could soften the bread in it. Alas, I must wait for Colton's visit, and sometimes he spends days out in the woods.

I risk the bread and eat it with the leftovers of rabbit.

It is a small meal, but it fills me quickly and I itch to untie my corset. My hooded eyes, drooped with exhaustion, slide to the window beside the door. At the edges of the curtain, some slivers of light seep in, but the light has darkened since I came home.

Night is drawing nearer.

I don't have much time now, and there is plenty to be done.

I store away my day's loot—the adder, wolfsbane, belladonna, almonds, salt crystals, and mugwort. After these chores, I don't feel so disappointed in my day's efforts.

The valerian is sprinkled over the workbench, ready to be seen to. After I wash and chop the roots of the plant, I drop a handful into the stone mortar. With the pestle, I grind the root until my wrist aches and then some more. I only stop when the root is crushed to a sludge. It should be powder-like, but I haven't allowed it time to dry out.

Abigail shouldn't mind. She drinks it with hot water. The difference in taste is slight. Should she add lemon, it might overpower the trace of dirt in the flavour.

I am wrenched from my thoughts when the door rattles.

Has the sun drifted away already?

I wipe my hands on the beige skirt of my dress and bustle to the nearest window. Peeking through the curtain, I can sparsely make out a muscular figure standing at my door. My eyes narrow and I hesitate. Then, I spot the rabbit hanging from his grasp.





## 5.

I'm quick to unbar the door.

Colton sweeps inside before I can stop him.

My eyes widen as he shrugs off his thick, fur-lined coat and drapes it over my couch. Then he tosses the rabbit on the table, where it rocks the lantern.

"Thank you," I snap. "That will be all."

Colton falls back onto the couch and peels off his hat. Auburn curls fall into place, over his forehead, to his temples, and he brushes them to the side. "Close that door," he demands. "All the heat is getting out."

I roll my jaw, outrage in my chestnut eyes so sharp that I'm sure I could cut him with my gaze alone. "Leave, hunter."

His head leans back on the couch's spine as his eyelids shut. "In a moment. I must warm first."

With a sigh, I slam the door shut—extra hard to jolt him—and slide the bar into place. "Warm fast," I say, then approach the table. The rabbit is not too small, nor is it too fat. It's just right—in the middle. I pinch my lips and sling it over my shoulder, lingering my gaze on the resting hunter that lounges in my home.

I don't like it. I don't want him here, but I understand the need for warmth. After a mere hike through the woods, my body ached to be near fire. Colton has been out there all day.

I take the catch to the herb room and lay it out on the worktop.

As I scoop out the valerian root from the mortar, I keep my wary gaze on the back of Colton's head. My stare is so strong and piercing that I can see the hazelnut hues of a few wavy strands.

"Do you have any tea?" he calls out.

I pack the valerian mulch into a cloth bag. "Should I offer you some, will you drink it?"

His head turns, just enough for me to see the dirt-brown of his right eye and the shadows cast from the fire over his profile. He thinks over my meaning—a witch’s brew might not be so safe for those a witch takes unkindly to.

Eventually, he turns his face away again and slides closer to the fire.

“I did not think so,” I mutter, a dark smile on my face.

Colton is not afraid of me, but perhaps he is not as much of a fool as I had thought.

Abigail’s package is ready for whenever she arrives.

At the small firepit in my herb room, I bring some water to the boil and squeeze in the scraps of lemon juice I have left. Not much, but enough for two small cups.

I cradle the cups in my hands and join him by the fire. “I half expected you to camp out in the woods all night,” I tell him. “If only to make me wait for my owed rabbit.”

Colton doesn’t deny the cruelty. He takes the cup and sniffs it. “It’s a full moon in two nights.”

How could I have forgotten that?

We villagers—even Grandmother—do not venture into the night woods on a full moon, or the nights leading up to it. The wolf is gone, but superstition sometimes works to keep us safe.

I notice that Colton hasn’t tasted his lemon water yet. I bring my own cup to my lips and hold his gaze as I sip. This seems to reassure him. He drinks it with ease.

There is something in his eyes. He looks at me, and beneath those long lashes of his I see swarms of questions and thoughts. They are veiled, behind mistrust and suspicion.

I set aside my cup. “Why did you really come inside?”

Colton licks a drop of water from his lower lip. He never leaves my gaze, not even as he leans forward and rests his empty cup on the table. Then, he brings his hands together and clasps them.

“It’s no secret in this village that you’re a witch. Everyone knows it. And even some come to you for certain...medicines—”

That is all he says before he is interrupted. A quiet knock taps through my home.

I look at the door, and it's as though I can see through it. It's not Abigail. I feel it in my bones. It's someone who needs my help much more than Abigail does.

I stand. "You must leave, hunter. I have business."

Colton clenches his jaw and looks at me a beat. Then, as quick as lightning strikes the sky, he has risen and pulled on his cloak.

"Out the backdoor," I say as he moves for the front. "Now—hurry!"

The quiet knock comes again, only this time it's a bit harder, more urgent.

Colton cannot hide the scorn from smouldering his eyes, but I shove him to the door in the corner. It's locked most of the time, so I have to heave up the bar from its slot with all my arm strength. It pops out and I rip the door open.

Colton has barely made it through the door before I slam it shut.

"I am coming!" I shout as the third knock sounds, rapid like the thuds of a run. "Be only a moment!"

I secure the door and look around for anything out of place. But then the pain inside of me grows stronger, and my palms drip sweat.

This only happens sometimes, when a patron's pain is at its highest. I feel her agony; her tears burn my eyes, the twist in her stomach churns my own.

This is why they call me a witch.

Because I am.

When I pull open the door, a cloaked woman dips inside. Ahead, in the lane, I catch a glimpse of Colton. He strides back to the Square.

Our gazes touch a moment, then I close the door on him a second time.

"Marigold," I utter and slide the bar in place. I haven't seen under her cloak yet, but I know Marigold's panic like I know my own. "Take a seat, warm yourself."

She does and peels off her coat with shaky hands.

I follow slowly, making sure to study each line of fear etched into her grim face. I barely perch myself beside her on the couch before her sobs boil over like water left in a cauldron too long.

I run my hands over my dress, sourcing her pain. My palms settle on the hem of my corset, at my womb. “Again?” I ask, with no judgement or disgrace, but with sorrow.

Hemlock women were cursed with misguided care.

Marigold was cursed with too much fertility.

At a mere thirty years of age, she has birthed five live children and two dead ones. There have been many that didn’t make it to the birth. It takes a toll on her body, more than her husband can understand. He takes no measures to stop the cycle.

It boils my blood and I itch to slip him some of my poisonous berries. But that will only bring more hardship to Marigold. She is not so well-to-do.

She wrings her hands together and tries to speak through her sobs; “I-I-didn’t kn-ow w...where to-to go—”

Silencing her, I rest my hand on her bunched-up ones. Marigold has no pence or shillings to give me. She has nothing to offer.

Still, I take pity on her. And I am a firm believer in a woman’s right to her own body.

It helps that she is kind to me when I join the markets in the daylight. Not many of the villagers talk to me, but Marigold does.

“I will brew you something,” I promise her. “Do you wish to drink it at home or spend the night here? I can offer you my bed to rest on.”

Marigold shakes her head, her hands battling with a handkerchief. “My husband ... He’s at the tavern. It was my only chance to come to you. He’ll think it’s only another miscarriage...”

*Only another miscarriage.*

Those words will haunt me and further fuel my resistance to a husband.

A miscarriage is a horror to a woman who welcomes the seed inside of her. A pregnancy is a horror to a woman who wants no seed inside of her. Neither is a horror to a man who will never know either.

“I will fix you a brew and you can drink here. By morn, the worst should pass.”

This is not Marigold’s first visit to me, and I shouldn’t think it will be her last. Not if she wants to live... The same way I felt her pain before, felt the anxiety in the pits of her stomach, I feel her future as I touch her hand with mine. Should she birth again, she will die. Just as she almost did the last time.

I tighten my hold on her frail hands. “Does your husband like tea or is he a man of ale?”

Marigold snivels and looks up at me with desperate eyes, though her pain seems lessened by my promise of help. “A-le... Why do you ask?”

I search her eyes a moment, I want to know how desperate she is. Then, I find it. The shimmer of hope behind the tears.

With a gentle smile, I shift closer to her. “There are methods... I have not tried them before, but I am aware of them.” I pause and doubt myself a moment. It passes. “There is a way to stop a man’s sperm from ... *performing*. It’s a remedy,” I add at her sudden shock. “A mere concoction that can be slipped into his ale once every full moon. It causes no harm and he should be none the wiser.”

Marigold wants this. Her eyes light up as the shock slips away and she thins her lips. Her gaze moves around my home, as if to make sure no one is here, then slides closer to me until our knees touch.

“I cannot pay for that,” she whispers. “You help me, Red. More than I deserve to be helped. But to take something so potent from you each month, I cannot do so for free.”

A smile slips onto my face. “I promised no free remedy but the one I give you now. I shall want payment each full moon for this concoction—it is a dangerous one to brew, and even more difficult than any I have tried before. But,” I add, “I shouldn’t want your payment in pennies or shillings.”

“How else can I pay you?” She wipes a tear from her pasty cheek and shakes her head. Limp orange hair waves around her freckled face, some

strands falling loose from the up-do. “I have no possessions, nor a garden to bring you vegetables and fruits. I am but a wife to a merchant—and he doesn’t even sell what belongs to us. He works for Knight Bennett up the hill there.”

“I know,” I say, and it shames to admit I cannot hide the glitter from my eyes or my voice. “I imagine you visit the Knight’s estate often, yes?”

Her brows knit together as she nods. “But I will not steal. My hands will be cut off!”

I wave away her distress. “I ask that you do small favours for me, that is all. Perhaps one month, you might sneak a strand of Lady Bennett’s hair for me. Another, I could ask that you pluck a leaf from a tree on their grounds. Small tasks, here and there. I am sure there will be whole months that pass in which I won’t need anything from you, Marigold. But on those months,” I say, my smile softening, “I shall still offer you the brew.”

She hesitates. I have lost her.

I almost curse myself, but then she warms all my insides and squeezes my hand in return. “I shall think it over.”

“That is all I ask.”

Marigold relaxes by the fire as I brew what she needs to expel the pregnancy from her unwilling body. I prepare it as a warm tea—strongly infused with mugwort and a pinch of belladonna. The belladonna will strengthen her sleep and take her away from most of the discomfort.

“Drink it now.” I push it into her hands. “Hurry home and sleep well.”

Fresh tears well in her eyes and she gulps it down.

Marigold is an emotional woman. She cries often. Perhaps it is normal given her troubles, yet I cannot bring myself to understand why she cries. I have shed no tears in my life. Grandmother tells me that I was even a quiet baby, curious and calm.

After I see Marigold out to the snow storm that is dawning on our village, I am ready for a night’s rest. But Abigail has not yet come for the valerian. Hours have gone by since nightfall, so it is strange that she is not on my doorstep, desperate for another of my special beverages.

I wait a while.

I rest by the fireplace, I have a tea of my own—perfectly safe, of course—and tend to my herbs. A half-hour passes before I start to skin, wash and prepare the rabbit. There is more to be done, but once I hear the chime of midnight come from the church, I pack up the rabbit's meat in paper and leave the rest for the morn's chores.

Sleep is distant to me tonight. My thoughts stay on Abigail. But soon, I drift off and sag under the thick fur blankets that are heavy on my body, and I dream of Abigail swimming in a lake of valerian.

Abigail drowns.



Valerian: pink and white petals, sedative.



## 6.

To concoct Marigold's infertility brew, there are many ingredients I need. Many that I don't have within the confines of my home or even in Grandmother's garden. In the dead of winter, I find it will be difficult to source most of these. Still, I write them down:

- 1.Hedgehog liver;
- 2.Tail of newt;
- 3.Shrew testicles;
- 4.Rabbit new-born;
- 4.Two wolf fangs.

I do not allow myself to be disheartened. Yesterday, I should not have seen an adder so far into the snow season, yet a freshly caught one is crammed into a mason jar to my left. The foetuses inside it will come in useful for this concoction.

Coincidences, I do not believe in. But fate, I do, and it dances all around me.

My lips bunch to the side as I drum my fingernails on the workbench. Where can I find these ingredients? Rabbit burrows shouldn't be difficult enough to locate, but that would mean to betray my bargain with Colton. Is it a bargain I care much for?

I'm not certain.

Though, should I betray him, he could steal back the adder or cause more trouble for me than I want. At the thought, I draw away from the workbench and grab my coat from the rack by the door. The sun is not yet above the horizon. It is early enough to catch Colton before he heads into the woods for the day.

I slip on my soft-soled boots, tuck my waves into the nape of my coat, then I am out the door and down the lane. At least the wind has settled somewhat. It no longer whistles through the gaps between the houses, and it has stopped its assaults on my face. All that is left of the storm last night is

the snow on the ground that comes up to the tip of my boots and the nip of the calm air against my cheeks.

I'm quick to reach the Square, where all the market stalls stand alone in rows. Soon, the merchants will be out in the chill to serve up the day's offerings. My stockings are beginning to wear and I might like to replace them—and if my fancy takes me, I should like to buy grain and some fabric for my dress making.

Those matters come later. Right now, I have business.

As I rush through the cold, my legs bang against my petticoat and the miniscule hairs on my exposed cleavage prickle with goosepimples. Beneath my breasts, my cloak is fastened with buttons and I consider perhaps buying fabric to bring the coat's neckline up to my collarbone. But to buy matching fabric could perhaps cost some shillings, and I am not certain how much I can afford to spend after I pay my month's rent to my landlord, Knight Bennett.

My eyes drift from the stalls to the shutters drawn at the windows around me. Above the tavern is one set of shutters painted white that lures my attention. Behind them, Abigail should be resting in her above-tavern dwellings. Though how she finds rest without valerian, I cannot guess. It is possible she sought treatment from the Priest Peter, or even the dreadful physician who runs the apothecary shop beside the tavern. The physician knows sweets better than he knows medicine. Hence, why my penny-jar only grows heavier as more villagers come to me.

Since I moved into the village last autumn, I have built my list of patrons with a gradual success. Soon, I hope to steal all of the physician's patrons for my own. That should secure my place in the village so much that even the Priest Peter cannot run me out. And who knows, I might want to open my own shop one day—a shop not unlike the apothecary.

A witch can dream.

I pass the shop I have my future eye on and draw my hood further over my head to hide my face. Gaze on the ground, I veer off into a lane at my right.

Metal gates greet me at the end of the lane, standing tall, foreboding and proud, not unlike the man I have come to see. The fire behind the gate burns strong in the stone pit, so I know he is inside.

I rap my un-gloved fist on the gate and wince at the icy metal's touch on my bare knuckles. Seconds tick by before I knock again, louder. I will not knock a third time—I will call out his name for all in the homes above to hear my visit to him.

A third knock is unneeded.

Colton steps out from a door behind the firepit and the orange light catches his dark his earthy eyes. There is a pause in him, a moment of surprise to see me there at his blacksmith shop. Well, he hardly sees me, but he would be colour-blind to not notice the only red cloak in the village at his gate.

Coming to his senses, he storms toward me and unhooks the gate. It creaks so loud that I wonder if it will wake his neighbours. Before I find out, I slip inside and shuffle to the fire, where my spread-out hands seek instant warmth.

Huddled by the pit, I let a shudder run through me as though the cold is ejected from my body. The clang of the gate behind me comes before the loud thuds of Colton's footsteps.

He rounds on me, but I face the firepit still.

"Why have you come here, witch? I told you I would bring the bounty to you. Was I not clear about the terms of our arrangement?"

I rub my hands together and stare at the flames. "No," I say. "You weren't. In fact, you said nothing about such details being absolute. And," I turn my cheek and smile at him, a dark one that sometimes has villagers scurrying away from me, "I am not here about our bargain. I want something from you, something I hope to barter for."

Colten sneers, a horrid twist to his otherwise pretty lips. He draws away, his gaze on me, and moves around the pit until the fire is all that is between us.

"There is nothing you hope to tempt me with. Nothing you can offer me."

"Now, let us not lie," I say. "There are many things I can offer you that you might be tempted to accept. I am open to suggestions."

My hands are warm enough to slip into my cloak pockets. I am quiet a moment as I run my gaze around the room, from worktops to iron rods

and sheets of metal. There is a door in the corner. Behind it, his mother lurks. Ever since her husband ran off all those years ago with whatever pennies and shillings they had, she wears black to mourn, and rarely does she walk the streets of the village. Colton does much of the work. His mother stays in the home behind and above their shop.

I'd hoped to catch a glimpse of her.

I wander over to a row of daggers, not yet finished. He follows me like a shadow.

"You once killed a wolf," I say. "What did you do with its remains?"

As I reach for a silver blade, he hits my hand away then slides in between me and the daggers. "What could you want with wolf bones?"

I tap my canine tooth with my sharp fingernail. "I want these."

"Its teeth?"

"Do you have them?"

"I might."

He runs his gaze over me, a brief pause on my bosom, then meets my gaze again. The flush of his cheeks betrays his thoughts. The very thoughts that allow me to feel safe enough to visit the hunter. Colton might claim to loathe me, and perhaps he does. Still, he is a mere man and his desires are easy to read.

"I also require a new-born rabbit," I say and count with my fingers, "a newt, a shrew, and a hedgehog."

"I wonder what I have done to mistake you, so." Colten steps forward, and I step back once. "For you to assume I am some lackey of yours is most puzzling to me. Our bargain is what it is, no less and certainly no more."

"And what of a new bargain?" My eyes glitter as I slip back my hood. "You have the woods, and there are certain things in those woods that I need by the full moon. A most unfortunate time for our bargain. Alas, I hadn't thought ahead when I agreed to it."

"My answer is no." He is firm in voice, his gaze harder still. "Now, begone. You are not welcome here."

This is not how I expected the visit to play out. Last night, he wanted something from me. A brew, a concoction, whatever it may have been. It could have been silly hope that led me to think he would want the mysterious favour come morn, too.

“Fine,” I say and draw up my hood. “I will leave. But I ask you to remember that these items are only useful to me before the full moon. Mere days from now. After then, my services will no longer be available to you.” I level my gaze and lower my lashes. “*Ever.*”

His face betrays nothing as I sweep out of the shop. Just to frustrate him, I don’t close the gate behind me, and when I reach the mouth of the path, I hear it slam shut.

It is impossible to know whether my threat has any impact on him at all. At least until the night of the full moon. Should Marigold want the infertility draught, she might have to wait another month for me to source the ingredients and brew it under the moon. And who knows what could happen to her body—her womb—in that time?

Not to mention, I already have a favour in mind for her to carry out as payment.



Belladonna: Deadly Nightshade.



## 7.

The markets will have to wait. Some merchants have emerged from their homes and I know Abigail's father should be among them to peddle his fine ales and wines. Yet, I see no sign of him among the greying and balding platter of wrinkles before me.

Above the tavern, her shutters are still closed and I recall my dream.

Often, my dreams merge with my talents. Abigail's death in a lake of valerian did not strike me as one of those dreams. After I woke, I let the tension from my sleep drift away from me as I dismissed the dream as a mere reaction to her earlier desperation.

Now, my certainty slips away and in settles an unease that chills my bones.

The sun has just touched the sky with pinks and sea-blues. I steal away down an alley that lines the tavern and curves to the back stairs. The pungent stench of the nearby latrine poisons the air—and though I shield my nose with my sleeve, the smell of bodily waste still seeps up my nostrils.

I take a moment to gag, then a shudder runs through me.

*This.*

This is the reason I had a privy built at the back of my home. I only have to carry the bucket underneath to the cesspool outside the village walls every day to avoid smells. Though, I am certain my neighbour the widow Gunhilda uses my privy. I say nothing about it. She is a frail old woman, too weak to walk the distance to our nearest latrine, and too poor to have her own.

There is no private privy here. It is one long stretch of a wooden shed. Inside, there are seats with holes in them. One's waste falls down the hole to the cesspool, which is emptied twice per week.

The stench is nauseating.

To stop from retching, I burrow my nose into the soft dip of my elbow and scurry up the stairs.

My free hand pounds on the door. Much too hard to be polite. I don't stop until the door whips open and I'm hit with the heat of a roaring fireplace. Abigail's youngest brother of eight and some stands in the threshold, hope softening his youthful face. Then he notices my red cloak and hugs closer to the door.

"Mama?" he calls. "Mama, the wi—the red girl is here!"

There's a crash from inside, then a stumble. Muttered words come closer until the boy is dragged behind a plump woman with full cheeks and a fuller belly. She eats well. They live a comfortable life from their tavern and market earnings.

Abigail's mother faces me and blood rushes to her blotchy cheeks. Above the red patches are bloodshot eyes and eyebrows in need of combing. Her lip curls just before she hisses at me, "What are you doing here? On my doorstep...I have a mind to tell Priest Peter!"

My lips thin as I drag my gaze past her to the inside of the warm home. To hope for an invite inside might be foolish of me.

"Good morn, Mildred," I say and incline my head. "I am here to check on Abigail's wellbeing. She asked to meet with me the night last, but I have not seen her."

Mildred's cheeks grow so hot that I ponder spontaneous combustion a moment. It would be a fascinating death to witness. Alas, she pulls back her mounting outrage and inches closer to me—as close as she dares, with a half-metre between us still.

"You stay away from my girl," she snarls. "Had to tie her to the bed last night, we did. Caught her tryin' to sneak out to see you—I won't have it. I won't. No woman like you should be around my girl."

I understand my dream now.

Abigail is inside, drowning in her need for valerian. Maybe I gave her too much for too long, and she craves the effects of my brew always. Have I made an addict out of her?

I hum a high-pitched sound and lift my shoulders. "All is well," I say. "I only thought to check on her health. You shall not see me on your doorstep again, *Mildred*."

She blanches at the way I roll her name off my tongue, long and slow, like the start of a haunting song of melancholy of the heart. For a moment, she thinks I have cursed her or that I mean to.

The mere suspicion of it will keep her away from Priest Peter.

I make to leave back down the creaky stairs. But then I catch glimpse of something in Mildred's eyes, not far beneath her sweaty brow.

*Lies.*

There are secrets behind her eyes.

I wave my hand in front of my face and crinkle my nose. "You should really do something about that smell, Mildred. Some of the villagers might think you are dirty to live in such a stench."

My dark smile returns before I take my leave and head to the markets.

Mildred might deny me to Abigail, but I trust my senses. They will be begging for my help before the week is out.

†††

Sadness fills me as I see that the pinks and blues have drifted from the sky. Instead, a sheet of cloudy grey settles above us to tell the people of England that it shall be another cold, dark day. Beside the stone platform that holds the stalls, I linger with my gaze upwards. Only when I bring my gaze back down do I see Colton.

He moves for the gate, his barrow carted beside him by a black horse sheathed in furs. Though he walks the opposite way to where I stand, Colton seems to sense my stare. He turns his head enough to catch my gaze, then his brows lower.

I am first to look away. I step onto the platform and hear the groan of the gate open for Colton and his steed.

This morn, the markets are bare. It is a downside of a heavy winter season. There is little meat to procure, no vegetables or fruits—*and oh, how I would poison for an apple!*—and a handful of seeds. All that takes my fancy is a packet of goat's cheese and a loaf of nut-toasted bread and jam. Together, they should make a delicious lunch.

Colours draw me in. Most of the unmarried girls in the village wear colours—blues and soft pinks and lilac. The married ones, as per tradition,

adorn dresses of beige, grey and creams. But I wear the boldest colours of them all.

Many fabrics catch my eye. Red velvet, soft to the touch; Silk, the purple of plums; A bag of wool, dirtied somewhat; and a red garter that shines at me.

I take my findings home, and as I pass the well, I wonder—at the weight of the stash in my arms—if I spent too much on many things. But then, I do not always have time to attend the markets before the rush. Mostly, I am in the woods before the merchants have set up.

So I decide that the fabrics are my treats and the food is necessary, because I cannot bake a decent loaf of bread no matter what I do. I was made without the touch of food, but with the touch of remedies.

After fresh bread and some cheese fills my belly, I lay out my fabrics on the table by the fire and consider them. There are many things I can make from these. Stockings, shoe-linings, cloaks, an apron—

My heart lunges to my throat and I freeze.

A terrible scream comes from outside. It is far away, enough that I should think it comes from the markets. But the scream is so loud, so wretched, that I hear it anyway—whether by ear or my special senses.

I'm on my feet and out the door. My cloak stays behind in my home. I must make haste. My boots whack into the snow, almost slipping out from under me, and my pale hair whips my face like a fine cane.

Still, I run until I stagger to a stop at the edge of the lane.

A crowd huddles at the well to my right.

The wretched wails come from there—and I know those cries. I feel them behind my chest, as though my heart has been hacked out of me, and my insides gutted. I feel the pain. Grief.

I inch toward the crowd.

Each villager is so absorbed in whatever they see that none notice me or pay me any mind. My bare arms and shoulders shake in the wind, but I hardly feel the cold over the grief. Boldness takes over, and I'm shoving through the crowd until I only a few people stand between me and the well.

I crouch down and peek between the legs of two men.

A body hangs limp on the edge of the well. Droplets of water fall from dark grey hair and form a puddle at a woman's knees—the woman who wails. I squint at the body, enough to spot the strands of dark brown that streak through a wiry mop of hair, and the wrinkled sag of a blue cheek.

It's the widow, Gunhilda. My neighbour ... what is left of her.

Someone—*something*—has filleted her. Strips of her skin dangle from her bones, hanging on by mere pinches of flesh. And I realise suddenly why I can only see a part of her cheek. The other half of her face is torn away.

A jolt runs through my body. I slap my hands to my mouth and I think I might sick myself. Not because I have a weak stomach for the dead. I don't. Sometimes, they even enchant me. But only a beast could have done this to her.

The claw marks that shred down her body in thick lines. The teeth marks punched into her open throat. Missing chunks of her arms and face.

Priest Peter pulls out of the crowd and all eyes follow him, desperate for him to speak, to deny all our worst fears. His hands lower to his thick cross where his eyes touch to. And he keeps his gaze down as he says it, loud and clear for all to hear;

“Prepare yourselves, people of Westland. The wolf has returned.”



## 8.

Chaos is all around me. Too much—too many screams, too much panic.

I cannot stay out here. Should they see me here, *really see me*, they will think I did this. Witches and wolves are two halves, says the lore. They come together, find one another. It is not true, yet I cannot reason with the fear that whips all around me. Fear that sees grown men race to their houses to board themselves inside, and mothers wail for their children to keep them safe.

I turn my back on the village and sprint until I barge through my front door. The wooden slab cannot slide into its bolts fast enough. Even when it does, the sense of unease follows me. I am not safe here.

It won't be long until some rabid villager declares that I hold the answers to finding the wolf. Or maybe that I am the wolf.

It only takes one idiot to infect the minds of half-wits.

And in this village, of half-wits there are plenty.

Grandmother told me to prepare for such times. I listened.

I move fast.

Moments later, I'm at my rear door, sheathed in outerwear and my drawstring pouch fastened around my waist. Today calls for a darker cloak, one that blends me in with the rest. It's black and fur-lined, heavy enough to hug my tense muscles with warmth.

I sneak outside to the end of the lane ahead. There, the wall of the village stands tall; I dip behind a private privy and crouch on the snow. My hands make quick work of digging through the snow, and they only stop when the loose panels of wood are uncovered.

Just as I am about to push the panels outward, a gentle breeze washes over me.

I still, frozen in the snow, my senses prickled.

Somehow, the touch of the wind warms me. It carries a flowery aroma I have not smelled in some seasons. Daffodils. Narcissus. A flower of

pride and disdain.

The scent lingers as I slip through the gap in the wall, and even as I run into the woods the smell follows me. But as I walk through the trees to the path, careful to keep the wall in my sight, the daffodils soon fade to a memory.

Come spring and summer, the flower is not uncommon in these parts. In winter, there are none to blossom nearby. The warm breeze that grazed me with its fragrance was not one that the ordinaries would have felt. That breeze was an open. One I do not understand.

Grandmother might know.

Hidden, I reach the village gates, then slink up the trees alongside the path. Should I be noticed fleeing by any of the guards, it will not look so favourable on me. Yet, to stay in the midst of hysteria is equally as dangerous.

Then, I think, danger lurks all around. The wolf may go where it pleases, whether in the woods, the village, or Grandmother's cabin.

The thought strikes through me; my walk quickens to a jog.

Once the village is a half-hour behind me, I jump onto the path. Hood drawn, I stride up the hill and don't stop once, not even when I spot one of Colton's traps at the root of a tree. If he sees me on his hunting grounds, he doesn't let it be known.

Grandmother normally greets me before I arrive—and so I expect the same today. Yet, as I push through the gate, she isn't in the doorway or in the garden.

I rush to the door and shove it open.

My gaze finds hers; she peers at me from the armchair where she knits.

My shoulders slump and I rest my head against the doorframe.

"Grandmother," I say. "You are well."

She spares me a brief wrinkled frown. "You expected otherwise?"

I kick the door shut behind me, then drop onto the couch opposite her. "You weren't at the door to welcome me. I worried a moment."

“Too much time in that village is meddling with your nerves, girl.” Grandmother jerks her head to the cauldron above the flames in the fireplace. “Some broth should settle you down. I could sense your fear from miles away.”

The cauldron goes ignored as I peel off my cloak. “Grandmother,” I say, coaxing her to look at me, but she does not. Her eyes stay on her knitting. “The village...I’m not certain I should return.”

She hums, a half-answer.

“Someone has been killed,” I add.

Now, she looks at me.

Encouraged, I lean closer. “A widower from the house next to mine. The villagers think the wolf has come back.”

“Nonsense.” Her fingers still and she holds my gaze with her stern eyes. “The wolf is gone, dear. It has been gone for many years and more to come.”

I shake my head. “You did not see it, Grandmother. The corpse...No human could have done that.”

“So it was a beast, of sorts,” she dismisses. I almost think her denial to be one stemmed from fear. “No matter. A band of men should hunt the beast and all will be settled.”

Incredulous, I crinkle my nose at her. “Men from the village? They’re more cowardly than city men. And this was no ordinary attack, Grandmother. She was shredded like old linen, and her body dumped down the well.” My voice drops to a whisper as though I can be overheard. “I passed the well before they found the corpse. There was no blood, no scrap of cloth or any indication that a death happened there. Someone cleaned up—or *something*.”

Silent, she sets aside her wool and needles on the table beside her. I notice my bowl is there still from yestermorn.

“Now listen here, girl.” Grandmother fixes me with her stare. “You have a wonderful gift. Unique, even for a witch. You see secrets in a person’s eyes—you read them as though you can see through their stares to their very souls. The first you notice of a person is their eyes; where they are looking, what swims behind the veil.” She points her finger at me. “But

one day, you will look too closely at the wrong one and you will have no one to blame but yourself when that one looks right back at you.”

“The wrong one,” I echo, piqued. “You mean the wolf? So you do believe it has returned?”

She bats away my words as though they flew at her. “Pfft,” she scoffs. “A wolf is not an *it*, but a *who*. A man not so different to us. Our kind and theirs are alike. But a wolf is more animal than man, and when the full moon nears, the animal is released. Do not put yourself in his path with hostile intentions, for you will not survive it, Ella.”

I study her a moment. Then I draw back into the plushness of the couch and cross my arms as I used to when I was a child in a strop. “How do you know this much of them?”

“It’s all in the book.”

Instantly, my attention is drawn to the picture frame on the wall. My eyes see a portrait of my mother, but my mind sees what sits behind it.

The Book.

Passed down from Hemlock woman to Hemlock woman, pages full of scribbled secrets and concoctions, tales of myth and where to separate them from truths.

Grandmother does not let me have the book. She tells me it is only inherited when a witch proves herself. To her, my ‘silly medicines’ are no better than those of a doctor’s, but with a ‘dash of magic’ that ensures their success.

I sink further into the couch and turn my narrow eyes on the fireplace. “How can I know whose eyes to look into and whose to avoid?”

“Look into no one’s. Secrets are not yours to learn. They belong to the one who holds them.” Grandmother sighs and goes to the picture frame. From behind the portrait, she pulls out the book. “Wolves are drawn to our kind, Ella. Magic to magic, power to power. But that should not suggest that our encounters are always of a friendly manner.”

Her fingers dig into the leather-bound book. The leather groans in protest.

I shift forward, my spine straight, eyes alert.

Will I finally be allowed to touch it?

No. I realise it the moment she hugs it to her chest, protective, as though the book is her new-born. Grandmother sinks back into her chair, then rests the book on her lap. With a flick of the hand, the book whips open and pages flip in a blur. It stops only when she lowers her hand to a page made from the thickest of parchment, sewn into the crinkled spine.

“Wolves,” she reads, “are beasts of lore from across all the lands. The mere mention of them strikes fear into those of common ancestry, and even witches flinch at the sound of their howls. Raised with the terror of wolves in my heart, I, as did every witch before me and beside me, learned the ways to deter the beasts. A garden of wolfsbane, a silver brooch, and the venom of a vampire bat. It is with the deepest regret that I confess that while these methods protected me from the Werewolf stalking my woods for months, they have fallen to failure. In his human form, the wolf stalked and bit me in a field of daffodils. I will not perish from this bite, nor will I transform into a beast under the largest of moons. But I will never escape the beast now.

“I set aside my duties as a Hemlock woman with a warning to all who come after me: The wind shall carry the smell of daffodils as an omen to a Hemlock woman whose path will cross with a Werewolf. Heed this omen, as I have not been so fortunate as to have one. Let the wind chase you to as far as you need go to be free of this fate.”

Silence lifts between us. Only the crackle and pop of the fire speak.

Grandmother locks her gaze with mine. “Do you know who penned this entry?”

Puzzled, I shake my head.

“My great-great-great cousin, twice removed. Narcissus Hemlock. The book was found by her cousin—my grandmother many generations away—who never wrote of seeing Narcissus again.”

There is a coldness inside of me. It brings to mind snow, stuffed down my throat until it melts in my lungs. I smelled the daffodils today, I smelled the omen of Narcissus. And by the glimmer in Grandmother’s eyes—though, I try not to look too hard—I suspect she knows this.

“Wh—what happened to her?” I ask, my boots shuffling against the floorboards. “Did she flee from the wolf?”

Grandmother closes the book and sets it aside.

“My dear, once a wolf bites a witch there is no escaping him. We only know that we can survive the bites due to Narcissus.”

“So I leave,” I say numbly. “I have no other choice but to leave.”

Grandmother spreads her hands, by means of indifference. “A viable option, only if the wolf wants you.”

“I smelled the daffodils, Grandmother. The breeze that carried the scent to me was warm and fresh. That means the wolf wants me, does it not?”

“It means your paths shall cross.”

I run my hands over my face, finding that my patience for Grandmother thins more each time I visit her. When I drop my hands to my lap, my face reveals my defeat.

“What should I do, Grandmother?”

“Find the witch.”

In answer, I simply frown at her.

“Child, are you naïve or a simpleton? A wolf can only be birthed by a witch. Never have I birthed a wolf, and nor have you or your mother. So, who birthed the wolf?”

A chill runs down my spine.

Another witch? No, I would have known, I would have sensed her presence among the villagers, or even in the woods that encircle us.

“He must have come from elsewhere.”

Grandmother does not look convinced.

My fingernails pick at each other, a poor habit that irks Grandmother. But I am suddenly so lost in my thoughts that I find I don’t care.

If I stay, I put myself in the path of the wolf.

If I leave, I abandon all I have ever known to rebuild in another town or city—one that might not take too friendly to my kind.

Still, if I stay, my only threat isn't the wolf. The village might turn against me. I could be hanged or burned at the stake.

I cannot—will not—risk my life for my lifestyle.

It is final.

“I shall leave this place,” I decide.



## 9.

Before I can leave, there are matters that must be seen to. This is the midday of Thursday, the day of an important appointment—or should I say, an important patron—of mine. Should my plans of leaving have any chance of success, I cannot leave this patron waiting. His payments fund my rent, he offers so much.

I hope to make it back in time. As I rush through the woods, I track the sun through the clouds when I can. Even when Colton blocks the path, loading up fresh kill onto his horse-drawn barrow, I ignore him and hurry past.

I don't relax until I am slipping through the loose panels of the wall, back in the lane behind my home. But I am too late.

At my rear door, he stands as still as a statue. Thick black gloves with golden thread hems are the first I notice of him. Those gloves are his giveaway—he risks much by wearing them so boldly behind my home. Yet, patience relaxes his stance as he hides behind a black velvet robe with a low-drawn hood.

“Red.” His aristocratic voice is a purr that ignites tingles in my belly. “How ravishing you look.”

However pink my cheeks might have been, they burn hot now. I must look horrid with my hair loose, my hood down, and mud on my skirt. “Dante,” I whisper and rush toward him. As I open the door, I glance around, then scowl up at him. “You risk much by loitering outside my home.”

There is darkness behind the hood; I cannot see his face. Yet, I feel his mischievous smile all the same. He shoves the door open, then he herds me out of the cold and into the warmth of my home.

My fingers reach up to the tie of my cloak. But I still as Dante reaches around me, his gloves damp, and unties the string for me. He is quite particular of how our engagements play out. Each time, Dante is the one to remove my cloak, untie my corset, roll down my stockings. I once asked him why he takes such pleasure from it, and he answered with a wicked

smile—but his eyes told me of his increased lust. I suppose he enjoys the anticipation.

Today, there is none.

He peels off my cloak. It drops to the floor at my feet as he grips my waist and turns me to face him.

“Dante.” Normally, when I speak his name under such circumstances, it’s breathless, a whisper, a cry of pleasure. But now it is firm, and he stops at the sound. “We must not.”

Dante pulls away from me, his gaze studying mine from behind the shadow of the hood. Then, he plucks off his gloves before he whips off his cloak.

There he is. Beautiful enough to steal my breath. Stunning enough to stop the villagers. And, lest I forget, charming enough to enchant a snake.

The pallor of his smooth skin reminds me of marble, whitened further by the black hair that he combs so perfectly to the side. While his jaw is strong, there is a delicate touch to his handsome face—a soft nose, rosy lips, high cheekbones. Dante looks nothing like his father, Lord Bennett, and only shares his sapphire eyes with his mother, Lady Bennett.

“Am I mistaken?” Dante’s tone is suddenly detached. “Is it not Thursday, midday?”

My lashes lower, not into my glower, but into a seductive gaze I reserve for Dante. He falls back onto the couch as I approach, every touch of his stare undressing me.

I slowly lower myself to straddle his lap. “Today,” I say and run my finger down his profile, “is a dreadful day for the village. They are afraid, and soon I expect them to be at my door, demanding answers I do not have.”

Dante’s hands slide to my hips where they rest. He considers me, the midnight blue of his eyes glittering like the night sky.

Eventually, he tells me, “You are afraid, Red.”

I shift on his lap, uncomfortable. Let us not analyse my feelings—we have not that sort of relationship. Sometimes, when we are finished, he will

hold me a while and tell me silly pieces of gossip he hears. That is as deep as our conversations delve.

Smiling tightly, I shake my head and say, “I do not want to be arrested and hung for what a beast has done—a beast I know nothing of. To reason with them ... Priest Peter, most of all, is futile. Each of them believes a giant man lives in the sky and watches over them. How can such fools be reasoned with?”

Dante smirks, a glint sparking in his right eye—catching the light from the fireplace. His plump lips steal my gaze, so soft and kissable, and he always tastes of something delicious. Sometimes sweets, other time fruits—even once he tasted of the finest wine I have ever known.

“I have this village in my pocket,” he says. “You will not be arrested for anything, Red. Don’t you think some have tried before?”

I blink at him.

Dante’s smirk breaks out into a grin. “Proud Red,” he purrs, and drags his hands up and down my waist with painfully slow grazes. “Priest Peter has been warned off you and the steward is a pawn of my family’s. Who is left to arrest you?”

“The village is in a state of unrest,” I tell him. “I do not feel safe here.”

He grabs my waist and yanks me closer, his eyes suddenly gleaming brighter than the embers in the fireplace. “You cannot leave, Red. I have done all that should be done to ensure your safety. The stockades are not in your future. So focus, with me, on the present.”

Dante twists and throws me down on the couch. My small smile encourages him, and soon, my corset is on the floor alongside my boots and one stocking. Before he can remove the other stocking, his patience shatters and he is in me.



A woollen blanket is wrapped around me as a shield from his hungry gaze. Thrice, and Dante is still not entirely satisfied.

He lounges on the floor, atop many layers of the best fur he can buy. The Autumn passed, he gifted them to me. They have since kept me warm many cold nights. The heat of his midnight eyes grazes the yellow hair that

falls down my back, and no matter how brittle or knotted the strands are, there is desire in his stare.

A dried-out log is in the fireplace. I prod the embers with an iron poker to lure out some flames. Warmth is seeping from my home, fast.

We stew in our comfortable silence until the church bells call on the hour.

Dante, his knee bent, and a corner of a blanket covering his manhood, asks, "What count is that? I was not keeping track of the bells."

I smile at the flames that lick up the log. "It rang four times."

He knows this, but he finds it easier to mention the bells before he transitions into farewells. His sigh comes first, as always, then the rustle of clothes.

The next I know, he's behind me, arms pulling me against him, and his breath is hot on the nook of my neck. I let my head fall back onto his shoulder as he nips at my skin. "I loathe to leave you."

Dante has read many novels, I should think. He finds romance to be implied in the most blatant of transactions. He pays me for sexual favours and I take one pound in the form of shillings. There is no romance here, only his desire and my greed.

Still, he whispers sweet words and promises of what his next gifts might be.

Then, I hold out my hand, palm upwards. I shatter the romance he tries to veil over us. Gifts are fine, I like the gifts, but I have more interest in what he owes me.

He places a leather pouch on my palm, his fingers grazing mine, as though he has placed a love letter in my hand. The pouch is heavier than usual. I am rigid in his hold.

"It is a harsh winter," he explains between chaste kisses that lead up to the shell of my ear. "I want you to be well-fed and clothed." He pauses, his mouth beside my ear. "And a wash would not be so terrible."

I elbow him.

He chuckles quietly and withdraws to finish dressing.

I curl my fingers around the pouch and place it on the mantelpiece.

Dante might fill my penny-jar, but I do the hard work. He is exhausting and, already, I feel as though we are in the dead of night, not the afternoon.

When I turn to face him, he is fastening his cloak at the strings, fully dressed. Armour gloves cover his forearms, black leather clings to his body, and a fur shawl is draped over his shoulders—it only adds to the proud impression of him.

“Same time Saturday?” I ask.

In answer, he winks at me. Then, he is gone.

I secure the rear door behind him and feel—for the first time since the morn—the silence of the village press down on me. Everyone, I think, must be as weary as I am, or afraid of the wolf—as I am.

I feel I shall have a long night ahead of me, so I afford myself a nap on the fur blankets by the fire.



## 10.

The shout of five church bells woke me, leaving all but one hour before nightfall. There was much to do in that hour.

Despite Dante's assurances, I recounted my penny-jar (for today, he paid two pounds in the form of shillings and gifted a phial of honey) to confirm how far I will reach should I choose to leave. My savings are plenty, I have more than a Blacksmith earns in a year.

I smirk at the thought of out-earning Colten.

He earns extra from all the meat he sells to the butcher and the furs he peddles to the merchants. Perhaps he earns more. It matters not. I have almost eight pounds in my penny-jar, enough to take me to the nearest city...

But then what shall I do?

Some questions need to be stewed before they can be answered.

After I hide my jar in a satchel that I have filled with some dried fruits, nuts and other things (in case of emergencies), I start on stripping yesterday's rabbit and cooking its meat in tender strips. There are two potatoes that I find to boil, and by the time the clock chimes again, I have made a hearty meal for myself.

Before I eat, I clear the table beside the fur-throws on the floor of my fabrics. But just as I kneel by the table, there is a knock at my front door.

I wait to sense who is on the other side. But no such sensations take me. Slowly, I rise from the furs and creep to the door. I press my hands against it.

"Who is there?"

There is a pause. Through the blankness around me, I sense irritation.

The voice is low when it answers, reluctant to announce where he is to all the village; "It's Colton."

My shoulders droop and I unsecure the door. Unlike last time, he doesn't barge inside. Had I expected that?

Colton looks at me with smouldering eyes, a stare so intense that I think for a moment that I must have slapped his mother. Then, he shoves a hare into my arms and allows me one final glower.

He turns and storms into the misty lane.

In the doorway, I watch him leave until his silhouette is swallowed by the fog. Before I close the door, I look around and see that all the shutters in the lane are closed; total silence presses down on us all.

I close the door and secure it, then close my shutters too. I blow out the candle-lanterns, leaving the low flames in the fireplace as my only source of light.

It will be a long night. I shouldn't think anyone will come for business.

After I eat, I do all I can in the quiet of the night.

I sew my new fabrics into capes, stockings, skirts, and undershirts. As I said, the night is long and who can sleep when a wolf prowls the streets?



Common Narcissus: the Daffodil. Poisonous.



# 11.

There is a village meeting in the Square this morn. I know this before I should. Dawn barely broke before Priest Peter sent his altar boy into the cold. Now, the altar boy cries in his squeaky, cracked voice of how there is to be a *‘village meeting in the Square, not a minute passed the ninth chime of the church bell!’*

The altar boy irks me.

I stand by the window in my herb space, hands on the windowsill, where I watch the boy ring his bell and stride down my lane. I’m moments away from offering him a special berry of mine when the cauldron hisses behind me.

“Oh!” I rush to its side by the fire. “Please, I beg of you, be finished!”

I swiftly wrap my hands in bandages before I pull the cauldron from the grill and heave it to the workbench. Some grunts and puffs later, and I look down at my brew, pleased. Though, I might have smiled some if the pest outside didn’t holler without pause, not even to take a breath.

I hear you, boy. Town meeting. Thank you and begone!

I have no way of knowing what time it is until the church bell chimes. But I know seasons and suns. In winter, these parts tend to meet dawn later in the morn, around eight o’clock—I heard the church bells then. But I can’t say how long has passed since the dawn church bells and now.

I fix the lid onto the cauldron and wipe my hands on a cloth. It should stand a while to thicken.

I dress properly for a town meeting. Gloves, a hat, a coat that cuts below my bosom, and I even pin up my hair. The colours I wear are much the same as normal; a soft blue skirt and a cream coat. Meetings in the town circle are not so different to the homilies in the church. We are expected to dress well, to have clean hands and faces, and to be silent.

It is lucky I chose to dress when I did.

As I study the dark circles under my eyes in a hand-mirror, the church bells shout through the village.

I'm out the door faster than I'd like. In the lane out front, a small string of villagers moves toward the Square. Each face is worn down, every pair of eyes is wrinkled and tired, and all share the same posture; hunched over as they brace against the icy wind.

I melt in with them. Those I came too close to pull away until there is a clear space surrounding me as if I am the wolf they must avoid. Still, I keep my chin up and stride with them through the lanes.

The others are quick to flock away from me when we reach the Square. They spread out and find stones to climb onto or crates to perch on to get a direct view of the Priest, who stands in the centre of the Square.

Beside the steward—our only law enforcer, though we all know the Catholic Church is the law around here—stands the Priest, clutching a worn copy of the bible in his purple-gloved hands. A wooden cross hangs just below his grasp, and a hat so wide it looks like a dark halo shields his face from the drizzle of snow.

My boots press into the sludge that the snow has turned into at the Square. Here, the ground is trampled on and water is thrown out from the well to fight against the snow—but I find it's now more difficult to wade my way over the slippery ground to the bakery. Out front, there is a stack of crates that I perch myself on. The baker eyes me a moment, but I purchase grain from him often so he says nothing.

Not all the villagers are here yet. Some still trickle into the Square from the lanes and, as I scan the faces of each, I notice that Abigail and Mildred are not among us.

Still, Priest Peter decides to start.

He holds up the bible above his head.

Silence.

Are we supposed to be struck with the imagery?

I'm not. I simply watch with bored eyes and hope to be on my way home soon.

"The word of our holy lord!" he cries. "Many times, he has warned us of the beasts the devils hath unleashed upon our world!"

He lowers the book and holds it at arm's length, his thumb peeling the pages to where a bookmark protrudes from.

"Daniel 4:33," he reads in a voice that roars louder than the bell. "And he was driven from men, and did eat grass as oxen, and his body was wet with the dew of heaven, till his hairs were grown like eagles' feathers, and his nails like birds' claws." He pauses, runs his gaze around his gathered flock, then lifts the book for all to see. "Our Lord hath warned us!"

*But he hardly offers a strategy, does he?*

"He hath given us the tools to defend ourselves—our divine spirits—from the devils lurking around."

I wonder why he says devils, as though there is more than one. Their religion isn't a piece I take active interest in, but as far as I knew, there was only one devil in their precious book.

"And he hath given us a woman," he shouts, "to protect us!"

Most frown at their religious leader. Even the altar boy looks up at his Priest with curiosity in his crinkled face.

Oh.

*Oh, no.*

Priest Peter turns his gaze on me. And with his stare, a near-hundred others follow. All to me. Too many eyes, too many people.

I shift uncomfortably on the crates, unable to fight off the sudden panic that surges through me.

"A witch?" Priest Peter points at me with the bible. "Or our gift?"

It is my turn to frown. Though, at what point it turned into a scowl, I am unsure.

I am no one's gift.

"Our red healer," he states proudly, "might save us from the beast! For she is the only villager to produce what it is we need—wolfsbane!"

I flinch.

Wolfsbane is deadly. To me, to the villagers, and to wolves. Each time I handle it, my hands are wrapped in gloves, and I ensure it never touches my skin. Even the slightest of contact can cause heart failure. And this

Priest wants me to what? Hand it out like home ointments to a village of imbeciles?

Improperly, I shout back at the Priest, “Silver works just as well.”

There is a murmur that ripples over the crowd. I have confirmed a lore of theirs. I have confirmed a wolf’s mortality, and in a way I suppose I have granted them hope.

“Ah, you see!” Priest Peter pulls his attention back to his flock, of which I am not one, I am the outsider on a stack of crates. His voice gains momentum now, and he shouts the way men do in a fight outside the tavern, so loud his face grows pink; “With the healer’s wolfsbane at our doors and silver in our hands, who shall be most fearsome? A lone wolf, or a village of furious men?”

There is a roar of agreement. Some fists pump in the air, and scarce are panicked expressions. Priest Peter has drawn out the animal in them all—for to fight an animal, they must become one themselves.

The hoots continue, even as the Priest shouts again, “Our healer—” The urge to curse him takes me. “—will provide us with our wolfsbane to hang at our doors before the moon is full, and our blacksmith—” He looks to his left, opposite where I sit. I trace his gaze to a huddle of people and see Colton, disinterested, beside his mother. “—will coat our blades with silver to end the beast! Each home will be defended, as will our village, for we are one united, but the beast...” He jumps off the podium and people part for him as though he is Moses. “...the beast is none!”

Cheers tear through the Square.

The sound brings flutters to my heart—the sort I feel when bad nears. Their silver and rage will not protect them all. They are mere tools to delay the inevitable. Wolfsbane is their only hope—and it is likelier to kill them before it can save them.



White Snakeroot: So poisonous that once ingested, the risk of contamination to others is severe. Native to foreign lands, must be imported with the trade.



# 12

I browse through the crowd slower than normal. Some women offer me smiles. They are tight smiles that I see as grimaces, but they look at me, they acknowledge me, and all it took was the Priest to announce me as a healer, not a witch.

Fools.

When this is all over, I am under no delusions—I shall be a pariah once more.

Still, I move with ease and lock sight onto my target.

Colton has turned away from me, but I catch his profile under the clouded light from above. With the distance of the sun, his complexion has blanched to such a pallor that even his few freckles melt away; so similar to the woman with him.

His mother, Catherine, wears skin not unlike my own; a pallor so white it resembles, not snow, but the translucence of watered-down milk. Most people of our land are pale, but Catherine and I are more so—the veins beneath our skins are stronger than our own complexions, leaving branch-like marks to spread over our arms, wrists, necks, and—in my case—inner thighs.

“Colton,” I say.

I watch each of his back muscles tense, a ripple from the nape of his neck to his belt, and he slowly looks over his shoulder at me. He wears the scowl I had anticipated.

Catherine steps out from his shadow, and much like her son, she stares at me with such disdain it’s a wonder it doesn’t boil my skin. She snarls, “You address my son so boldly, girl? By his given name, no less.”

“I mean no offence,” I tell her. “I only mean to ask if your household should want wolfsbane, too. Given your obvious dislike of me, I doubt you should want my help.”

“We want nothing from you,” spits Catherine.

Literally—She spits at snow my boots are half-buried in.

All pretence evaporates and my face cracks. A lethal look settles on my stony face and I take a step towards her. Colton slips between us, but I have eyes for the spitting woman only.

“You must be a bold woman yourself to spit at witch’s shoes.” I turn my gaze on Colton. Under the heat of his stare, I don’t so much as blanch. “Should you want any favours from me, hunter, I shall want my own fulfilled.”

I want my ingredients. And if the blacksmith household want even a dusting of wolfsbane near them, he must procure what I need.

Colton lifts his chin and straightens his shoulders to intimidate me. It is not as effective as he might hope.

Colton’s face is grim as he says, “You could have warned me. I saw you in the woods the very day of the attack on the widow, and you ran right by me. All day I spent out there, and when I returned, it was to a dead village.”

Surprised, I raise my brows. I hadn’t thought to warn him. I hadn’t considered that it would be dangerous for him in the woods during the hours of the sun. Night’s hours are for the wolf—then again, how much do I know about them, and how little does Colton?

“I was in a rush.”

Colton’s lip twitches, as if to sneer. “Yes, I know,” he says, the words rolling over his tongue, slick with meaning. “Every week, the same hour. I have seen him come and go. Tell me, what services does he purchase?”

There is no shame on my cheeks. I raise my chin and meet his stare with as much defiance as I feel lashing inside of me. “A patron’s business is their own, not mine.”

After a heavy glare, I trudge away through the snow.

I make it to the well before I am caught by the arm and turned around.

He stands before me, skin like moonlight—a glossy sheen to its pallor—and lips so pink and swollen that all their dirty deeds come springing to mind.

“Dante,” I whisper, aghast. Wrenching my arm free, I take a step back and glance around at the sprinkle of onlookers. “Whatever do you mean, grabbing me like this in the Square?”

“Wolfsbane,” he says, his eyes dancing to match his wicked smirk. “That is what you will offer us, is it not, *healer*?”

I fight a smirk. It would be the giveaway those onlookers search us for.

In a loud voice, he says, “I demand the most potent and largest of wolfsbane you can procure, Red.” Then, with that wicked smirk of his, he inches closer and says, “I shall collect tomorrow night, one night before the moon is full.”

“Of course.” I curtsy. “Yours will be the first I bottle.”

There is a huff nearby, an irritated onlooker who undoubtedly resents Dante’s place in the hierarchy of our village. The son of a Knight may do as he pleases here.

He walks away, catching many girls’ gazes as he goes. The fur shawl on his shoulders and the thickness of his velvet cloak bulk him up, some. The ensemble gives him the appearance of Colton—muscular and broad-shouldered. Yet, underneath it all, he is slender and fine.

I hum to myself then return to my home.

It is plenty fine that I started my own brew of wolfsbane this morn. Otherwise, I would never be able to meet demand before the full moon is at its fullest.



## 13.

I'm in need of more wolfsbane. I realised that after I scooped the pasty residue of the brew into small phials, then used the last of what I had to fill the cauldron for a second brew.

Grandmother might spare some more from her garden. I hope for her generosity as I hike against the chilly wind that tries to push me back down the path to the village. Uncertainty seeps into my mind the quieter the woods become around me.

Wolves are beasts of the night, but should that suggest they do not lurk in the hours of the sun? Their bites, so long as the venom enters the bloodstream, are fatal to ordinaries. A witch can survive it, but I wonder if it hurts as much as it hurts the ordinary people who suffer days before death.

Grandmother waits by the ajar door, her arms folded under her bosom. She watches me shuffle through the gate and up the path with narrowed eyes.

I expect her to say something, but she just ushers me through the door, then closes it behind us.

"Eat." Her voice is tough, the way it roughens at the dawn of a cold.

Grandmother sits on the armchair, leaving me with the couch and a bowl of...

"What is this?" I ask, stirring the green sludge in the bowl. I lift the wooden spoon and watch the goo slap back into the bowl in blobs.

"Repulsive," I add.

"Eat," she says again.

At her demanding tone, I quirk my brow at her and sip from the spoon. A shudder runs down my spine before I even swallow the first glob. I was right. Whatever it is, it is repulsive. Under her stern stare, I finish half. I stop to dry-retch and that is when she snatches the bowl from me.

"I will put some in a flask and you will have more with your supper tonight," she tells me. "It is a blend I concocted for you—for the pair of us."

“For what purpose?”

Grandmother stands and gestures for me to follow. I shadow her to the back of the cabin to the Secret Room.

“Grandmother?” I say uncertainly. She is and has always been a stern, sometimes unreadable woman. But today there is an unsettling touch to her, the way her lips purse together, the manner in which her eyes crinkle whenever I speak the only name I have ever called her.

My grandmother. My only family.

She curls her fingers around the handle and looks at me.

A pause.

I inch closer, itching to know what lies beyond the door she touches. But I am afraid to push her some, to ask her to open it. One wrong move and she could draw away from it and forever change her mind.

“Behind this door, Ella,” she begins, holding my gaze, “is the truth. Yesterday, I told you the wolf is gone. That statement remains true. I know this because...” She takes a moment to inhale, then turns to the door. Grandmother pushes it open and steps to the side. “Because I killed him myself.”

I stand at the doorway, frozen.

Eyes wide, I stare at the beast opposite me. Across the room, a wolf’s head is mounted on a pike....and not just any wolf. The sort that tears through villages at night and is man by day. Its head is large, larger than I’d imagined. From the point between its ears and the curve of its neck, I could fit my whole forearm. Yellow eyes, like sunflowers, stare back at me, though they are dead—as dead as can be.

Beneath it, in a cage, is what I assume to be the beast’s body. Only, it’s a human body without a head. Naked, blue and purple in some places, yet not a mark of rot touches the flesh.

The shudder returns, and I feel the aftertaste of the concoction with it.

“Grandmother,” I whisper. “What is this? What do you mean by showing me this?”

Her gaze is heavy on my face. She reaches out and brushes away a lock of stray hair from my cheekbone. “You are so beautiful, my dear.”

I turn to her, eyes wide, brows drawn. Never once has she said such things to me. Compliments from her are not welcome. I am unsettled and it shows in the way I tangle my fingers together.

“Are you feeling all right, Grandmother? You are not yourself today.”

“Not myself,” she repeats and looks to the Secret Room. “I’m afraid you do not know me as well as you might think, Ella. Come.”

I hesitate a moment before I shadow her into the room I have wished to enter my whole life. Even those time I forgot about the Secret Room, a flame of itch lingered within me, buried deep in the embers of other dreams and wishes.

Inside, there is no odour of rotten flesh to greet me. All I can sniff out in the stagnant air is musk and pine needles.

A table is tucked to the side of the door, hidden from me until I am inside. Some folded letters are propped up in a velvet-lined box, and there are two portraits in oval frames that I notice.

“This,” says Grandmother; she stands beside the cage with the headless corpse and hits her palm a few times on the wooden edge. “This is my former love, Silas.”

No words. I have no words.

As still as the corpse opposite me, I stare at her.

“Silas and I,” she begins, then falters a moment. “We met in the village, a long time ago. I was there on errands, and he approached me to let me know...” A shadow of a smile reaches from her lips to her distant eyes. “...I had my moon blood. A few drops had leaked to the back of my dress, and Silas offered me his cloak to save me from eternal humiliation.”

“That was kind of him.” My voice is quiet, a mere whisper, and I am uncertain she heard me at all. Her eyes are so far away that I wonder if she knows I am here with her.

“I did not know what Silas was, but of course him having the nose of a wolf,” she says with a light shrug. “He knew the moment he smelled my moon blood. To him, it held a scent of fertility. That is what he told me.”

This talk, even for myself, has my cheeks burning hot. For a man to smell—and comment on the odour of—my moon blood, I might die from

mortification.

“I loved Silas, very much. And I believed he loved me. Wolves are drawn to witches for one reason, Ella. Lineage.” She looks at me, a heavy stare than means more than I can read right now. “Only a witch can birth a wolf.”

*Narcissus.*

The wolf who pursued her, the cause for her sudden abandonment of the book, her old life. Grandmother speaks my slow-paced thoughts—

“A wolf’s only option for a mate is a witch. That is why they seek us out.” She strokes the cage once, a gentle caress as though she is touching a live, breathing Silas. “Naturally, I imagined that is what the future held for Silas and I. Until he married someone from the village.”

“Why would he do that?” My frown returns. There is a bead of sweat rolling down my temple that I swat away. It isn’t hot in here, still I itch to remove layers and dunk myself in a fresh bath. “You said, but a moment ago, that a wolf needs a witch as a mate,” I add. “So what could drive him to...to...marry another?”

“His chosen wife was the best of the two witches in the village. He chose the witch who concealed her gifts, attended church every Sunday, and who was a friend to most in the village. He chose camouflage.”

I swallow back a trickle of stomach bile that has somehow managed to crawl up my throat. It must be the goop that has made me unwell.

“I let him go.” She turns to me and levels my gaze. “And months later, I birthed your mother from his seed. Silas paid no mind to her. She was a girl, a witch, and he wanted a boy.”

“He wanted a wolf,” I say, my hand on the table to steady me.

“Werewolves...You’ll find they are not so different to the regular man-filth around here.” She catches herself and clears her throat. “Many years passed. Your mother loved, then she died. And you were brought to my care.”

I smile.

“Only, you were not the child in her womb. My daughter’s child died in labour.”

My smile fades. “Pardon?”

“You call me Grandmother,” she says gently, and draws away from the cage. “I am, in many ways. I reared you as my own, I clothed and fed and bathed you. I taught you all that I know, dear Ella. But you are not of my blood and flesh. Your mother was not my daughter.”

I have sunk back to the wall where I grip the skirt of my dress so tight my knuckles whiten. “Wh—what? Whose else could I be?”

“You were born an ordinary child.”

Has she slapped me on the face? It feels so. My cheeks burn with flames beneath my skin, and the same fire courses through my veins. I am very hot. I am dizzy. The wall keeps me upright.

Is it her words worsening my health, or was it the green goop?

I am unsure, but it cannot be good, for I must frown at Grandmother just to see her properly.

“There are ways to make a witch out of an ordinary,” she tells me. “But your blood is ordinary, my dear. The magic in you was a gift from me—a mere touch of what I could spare.”

I know the magic she speaks of. It is in the book, not something I have seen, but I have heard of it from Aunt Marge, Grandmother’s sister. A witch can give a piece of her power to an ordinary. It is how we keep the witches alive when our numbers dwindle.

I know of the magic, but I never thought it could have been done to me.

“You lie.” It is all I can manage to say. “You are a liar!”

Grandmother hears not my words. She takes another step toward me, and I shrink further into the wall as though she is the beast. “Ella, I killed Silas to protect you. He knew what you were, and then he caught the smell of magic on you. It was easy enough for him to realise what I had done.”

I wipe the back of my hand over my forehead; it comes away damp. That blasted bile comes up again and burns away any words I had in me.

“You see, Silas bore a son with his wife. Not so long after you were brought to my care by the Priest.”

I snap my gaze to hers, my chest heaving as I ache for breath.

“And Silas,” she says, closing the distance between us, “knew what you were. A made witch. One that would lure in his son with the deceitful scent of magic, but a witch who can never birth a wolf. Silas sought to remove you from his son’s path. He came to this cabin to enact his treachery. And I was waiting for him.”

Through the fog that has settled in my head, I fleetingly remember the garden, the wolf, me at the window. And Grandmother, in this room. The Secret Room.

“I cornered him,” she tells me. “I killed him with a bucket of wolfsbane to protect you, my child. Whether you are a true witch or a made one, you are a child I came to love as my own over time.”

I can barely manage to speak without my breaths catching in my throat; “Why... Why are you telling me this? What...what have you done to me?”

“You were two and three bits when I gifted some of my magic to you,” she says. “Too young to remember the effects. Now, you are old enough.”

I try to focus my sight on her, but she blurs before me. I see only my lashes lowering on a cloudy haze, like the day sky outside.

“You did it...again,” I croak, slipping down the wall. “Didn’t you?”

“I did.” She is not sorry. I need not see her eyes to know that. It is in the strength of her voice and the way her blurred silhouette nears me with determination. “Fret not. Grandmother is here.”

And I slip.

I know not if I hit the floor or if Grandmother catches me.

I only know an agonising darkness.



## 14.

I wake to Grandmother curved over me. Her lips are set tight and her brows hang low above her creased eyes. She doesn't relax as I pry my own eyes open and blink up at her.

"Ella," she says softly—as soft as she can manage with her voice as rough as rocks. She touches her hand to my cheek a moment, then withdraws. "How do you feel?"

I swallow back a dryness in my throat and fix her with my hooded gaze. It's an easy answer. "Betrayed."

Grandmother relaxes and rises from the edge of the couch. With a haughty hum, she turns her back on me to the now-empty soup pot. "Betrayed," she mutters, though I hear her just fine. She turns and points a wooden stirring spoon at me. "It would have been betrayal to leave you weak against a beast that lurks near your home. It would have been betrayal to let Silas tear you apart when you were but a child. Betrayal," she says evenly, "is what the vulnerable feel when those around them do not coddle them. You have not been betrayed, Ella. You have been gifted."

Weight on the heels of my palms, I try to shift myself back in the couch to lean against the sturdy arm. After many grunts and muttered curses, I recline against a fluffed cushion and eye the back of Grandmother.

"Does it hurt?" I ask. "To give me pieces of your power?"

Her answer follows a pause of thought. "No. It hurts to receive it, which is why I slipped valerian in the concoction, too."

I nod. Understanding is quick to blossom in me. Really, I should have known. Almost every day, I work with the potent plant, and I am so familiar with its effects that I can recite them at any moment.

Still, the drowsiness was second to the truths Grandmother told me. I had no focus to spare the valerian, I only had focus for what she told me.

I let my eyelids droop. "Why do it again?"

Grandmother moves to the portrait where she retrieves the book. "My magic is dwindling," she tells me. "A sign of poor health in a witch."

“A real or a made one?”

Her eyes snap to mine and she whips the book open. “All the power within *any* witch will fight off sickness and old age for as long as it can. Then comes the day there is no more magic left to use, and only sickness to fill the body.”

“That’s happening to you?” I stir and turn on my side to face her. “Grandmother, are you unwell?”

“Of course I am unwell,” she says with a cackle. “You truly are a silly girl, Ella. The first gift from me to you was to protect you, to offer you a sense of belonging in the world. And now, I give what I can afford. It isn’t much, but you will now have the power of a true witch...on the weaker of sides.”

So, I will be stronger. Still not strong enough to be a true witch, never as strong as Grandmother, but stronger.

“What is your sickness?”

“Oh, I could list for days.” Grandmother waves her hand dismissively. Then her hand comes down on a page and she runs her finger over words I cannot see. “Ah, there.”

Grandmother uses an ink-dipped quill to scratch something onto the page, then sets the quill aside.

“There. Now your name is in the book alongside my own.”

“Did you annotate it?” I sneer, or at least try to, but my muscles are weak. “*Made witch, adopted ordinary?*”

Grandmother rolls her eyes, but not the same way I do. They lift for a mere second. The gesture passes with a weary sigh.

“The book is yours when I take my last breath.” She places it beside the inkpot on the table. “Not a moment sooner.”

The corners of my lips tuck into my cheeks and I give her a stiff nod. She warns me, here. The hex she has on the book will only fade when her life does. Until then, I cannot touch it without blisters erupting all over my body. Eventually, they should fade, but the pockmarks would forever scar my flesh.

I lean forward and draw a blanket over my legs. As I glance at the curtained window, I see that it is fresh morn outside. My fainting spell must have lasted all day yesterday and through the night. It is Saturday, and tomorrow comes the full moon. I am now left with one day and night to make what the village needs.

“Grandmother,” I say. “If Priest Peter doesn’t think me a witch, why has he ordered me to procure wolfsbane for all the villagers?”

Her lips twitch into a ghost of a smile. “Did he,” she says, though it is not a question. “Peter has always been one for the theatrics. Oh, when he brought you to me...All that flapping of the robe, the shaking of his precious book.” She rises from the chair and starts to make hot lemon water. “You were inches from death, yet he cared most of how fraught he *appeared*.”

“Who was my mother?”

The question spilled from my lips so fast I could not stop it.

It takes us both by surprise. Grandmother stilled a mere moment before she set the black kettle on the fire-grill. “Your mother was a prostitute. As my own daughter passed, your mother followed days later.”

“In birth,” I say, my eyes downcast.

“There was no one to look after you. Priest Peter once came to me for a sickness in his leg. The village physician’s treatments were temporary. He put leeches on the wound, the swelling would fade a while, then the sickness would return.”

“Infection.” I pick at a loose thread in the blanket. “Priest Peter had an infection in his leg, didn’t he?”

“Indeed. And physicians ... Well, we both know how silly they are.”

“Everyone is silly to you.”

“No, dear. Only the silly are silly to me.”

In answer, I hum and push my finger through a hole in the blanket.

“Back to my tale,” she snips. “The priest came to me when he realised that the physician was failing him. Three visits to my cabin and he never needed to come again. So when you were near strangled by a cord from your mother’s womb and so close to death, Peter brought you to me. He

begged that I care for you. It took months before your strength was suitable and by then..."

"You had come to love me," I say, a touch of hope to my voice.

"Yes."

A smile twists my lips.

"I love you too, Grandmother."

Silence slips between us—the kettle's whistle shatters it.

Grandmother clears her throat and—with her back to me—pours us some hot lemon drinks. It isn't until I have had a third that my muscles feel strong again and the drowsiness lifts from me.

When I am poorly or unwell, Grandmother insists I do not go wandering through the woods. Our confessions today—of familial love—have hardened her. After she collected the last of the wolfsbane for me, she fills my basket with it and sends me on my way.

Before I leave, I ask her again why Priest Peter relies on me for witchcraft.

Grandmother tells me that he does not. He relies on his own judgement to bring hope to the villagers, for hope is the only emotion that can conquer fear.



## 15.

The church bell rings four times barely a minute after I unpack the wolfsbane on my worktop. Never before have I catered to the whole village. The weight of it slumps my shoulders and brews a sweat above my brow. I have lost too much time.

Years of practice speed up the process. That, and I wish to distract myself from the truths Grandmother told me today. Brewing wolfsbane paste demands patience and concentration, and I am all too willing to offer both.

The cauldron hisses in the fireplace, where it boils a fresh batch. At the workbench, I grind wolfsbane stems and petals into a pulp. Then, I switch tasks to spooning the cloudy-pink paste into small phials.

Will Priest Peter reimburse me for these phials? They don't come free.

The cauldron's hiss loudens to a rattle. I hurry over and take the cauldron off the grate to let it sit. Before I have my bandage-wraps off, there is a knock at the door.

Visiting hours have begun; I suddenly realise how tired I am.

Wiping my gloved hands on my apron, I approach the door and glance at the window. Through the gap in the shades I see a glimmer of light. Whoever is out there has a lantern, so should be able to read the 'CLOSED' sign I have hung out just fine.

"The wolfsbane will be ready tomorrow," I call to the knocker. "The Priest will have the supply midday!!"

Some phials are ready to be taken now, but I should like to have enough to distribute at once, and I am busy enough tonight without a constant parade of knockers at my door.

I am just about to turn my back on the door when he answers, "It's Colton. I have your owed trade."

I unbolt the door and usher him inside.

Colton surprises me. Two hares and a rabbit dangle from the rope in his hand.

He traces my gaze to the prizes he has with him. "I won't be hunting tomorrow," he tells me. "And you were not home last night to deliver the trade to."

"Oh." I nod numbly, disappointment drifting over me. For a moment, I had thought he meant the *other* trade. The one that should help me begin the most complex of witchcraft I have ever dabbled in.

I take the rope and lead him to the workbench.

His mud-brown eyes wander the shelves, and I suspect he might be impressed, or at least curious. There is not a mason jar or phial that his gaze doesn't rest on for a beat.

"Why the third?" I heave the kills onto a small table in the corner, then face him with the workbench between us. "The third catch," I say. "You owe me for last night and tonight."

"Tomorrow is a full moon." His eyes still wander, only now they graze the wolfsbane stems laid out on the workbench and the ground powder that has yet to be brewed. "Even in the hours of sunlight, I shouldn't think it wise to risk a hunt in the woods."

"You surprise me." Hands still gloved, I spoon a lump of powder into a wooden mixing bowl. "You hardly look as wise as you seem."

He doesn't react. No sneer, no insults. He just watches me prepare the next batch of wolfsbane for a quiet moment. I almost think he is enchanted, though the thought is sillier than Grandmother would tolerate of me.

From beneath my lashes, I study him. Each flicker of his lanternlight over his shadowed face, the gleam of his rich eyes, the way his pink lips pinch as if to lock away secrets.

"You want wolfsbane, I want a fresh trade," I say.

Surprise raises his brows as he looks at me. He thinks I have read his mind, but I merely read his face. Colton rests his lantern on the workbench, then unties a leather pouch from his belt.

He hands it to me. "Does this suffice?"

I peel open the pouch, large enough to stuff a small rabbit into. My bunched lips stay at the side of my face as I sift through the contents.

One newt. A shrew, though smaller than I had hoped. Part of a hedgehog (I imagine an animal got to it before Colton did).

I release the pouch and look at him. “And the new-born rabbit?”

“Of that, I had little luck,” he tells me, fingering the edge of his lantern. “I looked, and the closest I found to a new-born rabbit is that.”

He points to the adder in the jar behind me—the pregnant adder he traded some days ago. It isn’t enough. I need a new-born. Not to kill, but to extract blood from. I care not if the new-born hops off with its mother after.

“Is there not another way to get one?” I ask, my voice a huff. “Truly, all I need from it is a phial of blood.”

Colton drums his leather-wrapped fingers on the bench. “The butcher might be in possession of one. We have an understanding.”

“Excellent.” A smile lifts my lips and I hand him a crystal phial no longer than my pinkie. “Fill it two thirds of the way.”

Colton’s blank expression remains as he tucks it into his pocket. Then his eyes meet mine—he holds my stare. I read him easily.

“Fine,” I relent. “Have your wolfsbane now.”

Colton swipes a full phial from the bench.

“Be careful not to touch it,” I tell him. “If a drop of that makes contact with even the hairs on your body, you could very well die. Wolfsbane is most lethal, even from mere contact with the skin.” I raise my brows to emphasise how important this is. He nods once, a brisk tip of the head. “To use it best,” I add, “you shall want to coat a brush with some drops, then paint it around the entrance to your home. A doorway to most, but you...”

I hesitate and think of the wide gate. Then I hand him a second phial.

“You shall need two. Ensure that every bit of that gate is covered in this. And even after it dries, *do not touch it without gloves.*”

“What is to stop a patron from touching the gate?”

“The villagers will all know by tomorrow midday. Though, some are blatant imbeciles, so might I suggest a sign to remind them?”

“Like the one on your door?” He jerks his head over his shoulder. “*Closed—do not knock or touch.*”

“Precisely.” I smile a tight gesture, but it doesn’t reach my eyes. There is no wolfsbane on either of my doors yet. I have been too busy trying to catch up with the demand that I forgot my own need for it.

Colton lingers a moment, and I am taken back to the first night he came to my home. There was a question in his eyes then, and it has returned now, drifting behind the veil.

I arch my brow and study him. Finally, I ask, “What was it you wanted from me the first night you came?”

The veil darkens. “I wanted nothing from you. My intent was to ask a question.”

“Is there a difference between wanting a remedy and wanting an answer to a question?” I lean over the edge of the bench and tuck my arms together. “Not much of a difference that I can see, for sometimes answers are just as medicinal as remedies.”

Perhaps I speak a piece of my own thoughts, of Grandmother’s confessions.

Colton folds his arms over his chest and studies me back. His gaze drops a little, to my bosom, but he’s up and staring at me again with a second.

“You’re a witch,” he tells me.

“Am I?”

Colton rolls his jaw, churning through the wave of thoughts that shimmer behind the darkness of his chestnut eyes. Then, he puts his hands on the bench and leans closer to me. “You are a witch,” he echoes. “An impressive one, to some. Are...are there limits to the medicines you can make?”

I snort, a most unladylike sound. But I am no lady and have never pretended to be. “Of course. Limits apply to all medicines that anyone tries their hand at. There is no cure for most diseases, and there is always the

inevitable fate of our deaths. I try to make the journey to death a bit more comfortable, is all.”

“*Comfortable*,” Colton repeats.

He drinks me in as if seeing me for the first time, and not of the heated sort. There is a flush to his cheeks and he glances over his shoulder as though someone is standing behind him, listening to each word we speak.

“I need something for comfort,” he says in a low, deep voice. If it is meant to be a whisper, he fails terribly. And his gaze drops again, just as quick as the last time.

I draw back. It is my turn to blush. Surely, he does not think he is in any way a man like Dante is. Dante is the only patron I shall offer such services to.

Before I can voice my offence, Colton explains; “My muscles—from the work I do out in the woods, the labour around the village, the craftsmanship in the workshop...” He shakes his head, and I understand his blush now. He is embarrassed, as a man, to admit a physical defeat. He cannot look me in the eye, so he stares at the wolfsbane. “The pain is so great that it clutches even to my bones. When I awake, everything within me feels...shattered.”

After a pause, I duck and find a mason jar down a low shelf, far behind a small curtain I made. I bring it up to him and slide it across the workbench. “Here you are.”

Colton flinches as he studies the black sludge inside the jar.

“Don’t let the look of it fool you...or the smell, either.” I tap the cloth lid, fastened with a piece of twine. “You shall want to bathe after you use it.”

“And how does one use *that*?”

“Cover the sore areas of your body and sleep in it. It’s normal to be light-headed afterwards, but that is the smell’s effect, not the brew. Three nights in a row should repair the damage.”

Colton stares at me, aghast. I almost think the expression of horror he wears humorous. “I cannot sleep in that.” He pushes it back to me. “Is that all you can offer?”

With a heavy sigh, I roam my gaze around the shelves. Then, it hits me.

Normally, I reserve this for the wealthier of my patrons. It takes months to extract a single dose. I find it in a wooden box underneath the worktable.

Colton eyes it curiously as I place the box on the bench and open it. Inside, there are some phials, but only one I reach for—a single phial with pink oil in it and crumbs of dried root.

“This.” I hand him the phial. “Same method—sleep with it on, though you should want to dab it, not spread it. Don’t be too generous with the amount you use at once.”

He brings it closer to his face. As he eyes a petal glittering in the oil, he asks, “What is that?”

“A petal from a dog-rose. It smells wonderful, so you can wear it any time of day you please.”

Colton nods then stuffs it in his belt-pouch, separate to the wolfsbane phial.

He looks at me.

Brows bunched, I study him—his curious gaze, the way he searches mine.

It is an awkward moment. His face is half-scowled, half-soft. It’s a handsome expression. Most in the village think him handsome, but he is so unapproachable and rude to most that girls don’t flirt with him, and they know him unavailable for marriage.

Colton is too busy for a family.

Ever since his dad left, his workload has ...

I blink.

*“The pain is so great that it clutches even to my bones. When I awake, everything within me feels ... shattered.”*

Colton stares back at me. Behind the veil, I see what he hides from me. My gift betrays itself at the worst of times and I see him for what he is. Yellow hues glitter in flecks among the brown of his eyes, and in the shadows I catch sight of memories unshared.

*“One day, you will look too closely at the wrong one and you will have no one to blame but yourself when that one looks right back at you.”*

Something shifts between us.

I clear my throat, but the sound is high-pitched and squeaky. The squeak of a frightened mouse springs to mind.

“Is...Is that all?” I ask with a forced smile.

Colton is quiet, he watches me. Rich soil and coal swarm together in his eyes, forming a pond like nothing I have ever seen.

He knows. He knows that I know. It’s all over my pink face, in my shifty eyes, and—he looks to my breasts again.

Now, I understand. He looks to them and my realisation is confirmed—Colton watches the bang of my pounding heartbeat against my skin. He sees in every thump at the crevice that I am afraid, that I have realised, that I know what he is.

Colton slowly lifts his hand and takes the lantern from the workbench. His gaze finds mine again, and he holds it for an eternal moment.

Then, he dips his head and leaves.



## 16.

A dark fog has settled in my head. It chokes all my thoughts before I can fully realise them. Still, even through the haze I lunge for the door and slam it shut behind him. My hands shake as I yank the panel down into its slot. I bolt both doors and close all the window shutters, but it feels as unsafe as it would if I left everything open.

My heart doesn't stop in its race against me.

It pounds against my bones, as if it wants to break free of my cursed self. And that is what I am now, is it not? Cursed.

The wolf knows that I know...

A made witch, I am. A dead witch, I am soon to be.

To hell with the villagers. I set aside three whole phials to smear across my doors in the morn. To try it now would be too risky. It's dark outside. Colton can turn before the full moon—enough, at least, to kill the widow. If he turns tonight...

I rush back to the workbench and plough through my work.

Wolfsbane is all that will protect me should he burst through my walls or doors. I have jars full of it, a cauldron brewing, and dozens of phials.

What I don't have is silver.

A silver blade would be handy right now. Though, the blacksmith might be reluctant to sell me one—

A light tap comes at the rear door.

I snatch phials of wolfsbane. Some, I stuff into my skirt pockets, and I fit two between my breasts. Should the phials break, I will die before the sun rises. But if I have no weapons to use, I will die long before the sun rises.

The knock comes again, louder this time.

I peek around the drapes to the door, my breath a rattle of air.

Hand against the wall, I inch closer to the door with slow steps. Then, I close the small distance in a hurry and feel for the other's energy. Colton surely hasn't come for me so soon...

I don't know what I am telling myself. He may come whenever he chooses, whenever he turns into the beast that he is.

Breath held, I listen for any giveaways on the other side of the door. A huff of hot breath, a low growl, a sniff of the air. I hear nothing but an impatient sound... a very human sound.

"Who is it?" I whisper at the crack between the door and pane.  
"Announce yourself."

"It's me, Red." His hushed voice floods me with relief.

I rest my forehead on the door and let out a harsh breath.

"Should I freeze out here?" he asks. "For you, I might consider it."

I unbolt the door and he slips through the small gap with ease.

It takes all of three seconds for Dante to look around, find me with his mischievous gaze, then stiffen. He sees how shaken I am. His midnight eyes search mine a beat, then he is beside me, pulling me into his embrace.

"What is the matter, Red?" he whispers into my hair.

I untangle myself from his arms. Dante and I do not embrace like this. Sometimes, after we lay together he will hold me, but not like this.

His eyes follow me as I draw back to the wall and slump. My breaths still come in raspy hitches, but my heartbeat begins to slow. Perhaps I don't feel as exposed with another by my side.

Whatever the reason, Dante's presence calms me.

He takes a single step that closes the distance between us. His hands take mine as he searches my hollow gaze. "Tell me if I am prying, but I fear you might collapse," he says. "You look quite unwell, Red. Is there anything I can do for you?"

I shake my head. There is nothing anyone can do for me.

My lips pinch inwards a moment as I grasp at my thoughts. "I cannot..." I hesitate. "Dante, I am afraid tonight will not suit what you want from me."

Dante's hold tightens. "Ella."

At the sound of my name on his lips, I jerk my head up. We are aligned.

"What sort of brute would I be to ask that of you? Looking at you now, *that* is the least of thoughts on my mind."

There is so much strength in his voice that I blink. I almost believe him.

"We shall spend our time on other matters," he says, his hold firm on me.

"What other matters?"

All I can think of is the wolf. Colton under the moonlight. Waiting for his change.

Dante looks at the workbench, littered in unfinished business. "I see you might need my assistance. So if you will not confide in me, we shall have to do something. What better than your chores?"

Blankly, I look up at him. I don't see him, really. My gaze feast on the moonlight sheen of his skin, the midnight glimmer of his eyes, the combed hair that flattens to the side and to the shell of his ear. I see his face, his appearance, but not him.

Perhaps Colton has frightened me so much that my power to read has dwindled.

"Red, please," he says, bringing me back to him. "Tell me what the problem is."

I roll my jaw twice and part my lips thrice—the seconds tick by like that before I heave a sigh and stare at the slice of tunic beneath his heavy coat.

"I have good reason to fear a visit from the wolf tonight," I whisper. "It is not safe for you here. You should leave before he comes."

Dante is silent a moment. Then his face lights up with a wicked grin and his hands slide up to my arms. "And where shall you go, my sweet witch? Off into the woods where the wolf can easily hunt you, or stay here to be cornered alone? Leave." He scoffs a half-chuckle. "Not if you paid me."



I rinse my gaze over his proud profile. He is a nobleman in more ways than the term suggests. A nobleman who stands beside me at the workbench, three hours into our night, and patiently chops the last of the wolfsbane as I fill phials.

Together, we make quite a team.

Together, there is less fear in me.

Still, my eyes drift ahead to the front door every other moment. I'm certain a minute at most passed in which I forgot to look at the door. That moment was when Dante confessed to me that he dreams of other lands.

To see him this way—beside me, chopping wolfsbane in his tunic, hair tousled by the steam from the cauldron—is surreal. He tells me some dreams, of lands he knows and of lands he doesn't. He sprinkles in some jokes. And all the while, he keeps the silver-coated dagger hooked to his belt.

If I was a fool, I would let my mind wander to this night becoming my normal. But I am no fool. Dante fancies me. He lusts and he is kind. But this will never be our normal, no matter how...*secure* it feels.

Dante scrapes the wolfsbane into the wooden bowl once it's chopped. Then he slams the point of the knife into the workbench and asks, "Would you mind terribly if I released a burning question from within me?"

I smile, but hope it hides under the dark light of the room. "You have earned a question tonight."

"What prompts you to believe the wolf will come for you?"

I don't even blink—I knew the question was coming. Still, hours of knowing and I came up with no solid answer other than the truth. So it is the truth I tell him.

"I think I have realised who he is, and he has realised me too."

"You mean the wolf is aware of your knowledge?"

Scraping the final spoon into a glass phial, I nod in answer.

"Are the tales of them true?" he asks. "Can they change at will, or only under the moon's glow?"

With honesty in my unveiled eyes, I look at him and shrug. “I don’t know, Dante. Of the wolves, my knowledge is spread as thin as I can afford.”

Dante peels off his gloves then slinks toward me. The fluid motion springs to mind the wolf again, moving in on its prey. He draws me away from the workshop and runs the tip of his nose along my jawline.

“And of all my knowledge, sweet witch, why the wolf would want to harm you is incomprehensible. You pose no threat, and you would keep its identity a secret, I should think.”

I pull away to glare at him.

Unfazed, Dante pinches my chin and tilts his head. “Wouldn’t you? A wolf and a witch seem to me the makings of a strong alliance. Powerful outcasts banding together ... I meant no offence, Ella. Fix your hard stare on another.”

I bunch my lips and return to the worktop. “Put your gloves on.”

The heat of Dante’s stare burns the back of my head. But then he does what I demand and is back beside me at the workbench.

His words dance in my mind.

Could Colton and I be allies? Is it too late for that?

Should I survive the night, it might be wise to offer him such a bargain. Bargains seem to interest him some. And with an agreement between us, what need would he have to kill me?

Grandmother comes to mind—she killed Silas.

Is Colton intent on revenge? Or is he determined to finish what his father started? To kill a made witch, to remove her from his line of temptation.

Colton could have learned the truth of what I am from his mother. If she’s the other witch...

Soon, my head aches and I cannot decide if the pain comes from the fumes or the tangled mess trapped under my skull. Dante takes me away from the workbench and pours me hot lemon water.

More hours tick by. Midway through the night, we share cured ham and a piece of bread. I bought this batch of bread, so at least it is edible.

Our night slips by us like this. Side by side, at the foot of the couch,  
snacking and waiting...waiting...

Waiting.





# 17.

I wake with a start.

Jerking upright, I pry open my hooded eyes and wipe the back of my hand over my lips. Drool covers me. I wipe it on the blanket gathered between my legs, but then I come to my senses when Dante groans.

I am straddling him on the couch, and the stiffness of my neck speaks of an uncomfortable position to sleep in. We must have drifted off sometimes after we snacked on sugared almonds.

Dante rubs his fists on his tired eyes. "Tell me you did not wipe your drool on my tunic."

I grimace and glance down at the wet patch. It appears I have done more than wipe my drool on his tunic. I seemed to have directly drooled on him for quite some time. "I did not wipe drool on your tunic."

"Liar." He swats at me lazily. "This fabric was imported from across the sea."

I roll my eyes, the urge to make a face at him gnawing within me. But to make a silly face at him would be too familiar. And all of this, our night and our morn, is too familiar.

I climb off him.

Dante tucks a forearm under his head and follows my frantic movements with a tired gaze. "Is this a regular routine for you in the morns?"

While I balance on one foot, I yank on a stocking with one hand, and use my other hand to comb through my tangled hair. "A noise woke me," I say.

"Oh." Dante sits up and glances between the two doors. "Are you expecting any visitors?"

The wolf.

But it is the morn, the sun is up, the wolf is down.

“I rarely am expecting visitors when they arrive.” I shake out my hair to fall down my back, then use a cloth from the washbowl to wipe at every bit of exposed flesh I can. “Aren’t you going to dress?”

“I fancy myself a long rest where I am.”

Brows knitted together, I round on him. “Someone might see you, Dante.”

He shrugs. “Only if there is someone at the door. It could have been a mere bump from outside. And if you are correct, we can always simply pretend we’re not here.”

I relent to my urges. I make that face at him, though it is more of a scowl.

A tired smile graces his face and he crosses his ankles. “You are a frightful morn person.”

“Frightful only in the morn? You and your flattery will not soften this heart.”

In answer, he gives such a dazzling smile that it twinkles his eyes with the stars of the night.

As the seconds give way to minutes, I dismiss my startled wake as a mild scare. It is one of those rare morns where my dreams are fast erased, though it wouldn’t be far-fetched to think I dreamt of the wolf—A solid enough reason to jerk awake at any sound.

Dante lounges on the couch for the better part of the hour.

His eyes follow me around as though if he looks away a mere second, I will vanish—or be gobbled up by the wolf in hunter’s clothing. Now that I think on it, a hunter’s skin is an ingenious disguise for a wolf. For a half shilling, I might admit to how it impresses me.

After Dante and I share the last of my bread, a real sound comes from the door. A rapid knock at the rear of the house.

I need not call out to know who stands on the other side. Her panic slips through the cracks of my home and poisons the air with a bitter tang. She is here for help she does not want to ask for.

Villagers are odd in their stubborn pride. Don’t they realise pride is expensive to keep and bears no rewards?

Fools, the lot of them.

Dante dresses quickly and ducks behind the rear door before I open it.

My hand flattens against the doorframe, and I level my gaze with hers.

“Mildred,” I say with the coldness of the snow outside. “The sign on the front door is very clear. I am closed to business today. Correct me if I am wrong, but I don’t recall writing in fine print *come around back*.”

Mildred’s blotchy cheeks burn brighter, not with rage, but with what I want to see on her. Humiliation. This is my small retaliation for her slights against me. It isn’t much, but it satisfies me.

Even in her state, Mildred puckers her lips to an inch of likeness to a cat’s bottom. My own wrinkle in disgust.

“It’s Abigail,” she says, as though I didn’t already know. “Her health ... We took her to the physician and—he cannot help.”

I am aware.

In all his time of poaching my patrons, never has the physician helped one. No ordinary can brew what a witch does. A dash of magic is the difference between remedy and poison, life and death.

“Come in.” I pull closer to the door, letting her pass by me.

Mildred squeezes through the gap, her pudgy arm grazing my breasts as she does. Her back is curved, her shoulders slouched; she does not even want the walls of my home to see her here.

As her back is turned, Dante slips out from behind the door and leaves. Still, cheeky as he is, he chances a touch of my hand before the door shuts on him.

“So,” I begin and peel off my apron, stained with the blood of hares. “What has that foolish man done now?”

I hold up my hand before she can speak.

“Wait. I think I might guess ... He tried to ween her off my sedative brew with smaller doses of his own, which has led to Abigail’s delirium and poor health?”

Mildred's lips part—bits of the skin sticks together, making my stomach churn.

“Did he tell you that the last time he fed a patient valerian, she died? No, I'll bet he said nothing of the sort.”

Mildred points her red, swollen finger at me; “You shift blame when it was you who introduced her to the poison to begin with.”

“Please. What I brew is not poison. And if I am guilty, you are doubly so. Making her marry a man she does not wish to be wed to.” I finish with a scoff and derisive glare that runs up and down her plump figure. “Some mother you are.”

Red flushes all over her, no more in blotchy patches—all over, as if painted on. “Bailiff John is a fine candidate for my daughter's hand. His land is much, his rank high. You dare accuse—”

I laugh outright.

“Bailiff John?” My grin sticks to my face. “A man twice your daughter's age, who reeks of ale and bad bathwater. You force her into intimacy with a stranger so foul, and as her mother—and a woman—you have the nerve to defend your choices?” I take a slow step closer, and my grin fades to a half-snarl. “You might as well be the one to tie her to the bed for him to ravish. Blame rests more on your shoulders than anyone but the Bailiff's.”

Mildred gapes at me, her cheeks so red they might burst from all the blood gathered. Rage fills her lungs, pushes her chest hard against her corset, and wobbles her meaty hands.

“Now,” I say with as much calm as I can muster. “We may spend time disputing, or you can ask me to save your daughter's life.”

This sends her crashing back to her circumstance. She came to me, she needs me—and her ignorance shields her from the truth that I would help Abigail without Mildred's meddling.

Still, I am what Dante sometimes says—vindictive.

Mildred swallows and looks to the herb room. “Help her and I will pay you.”

That's the best I can hope to pull from her.

I slap a smile on my face and sweep over to the herb room. Mildred shadows me with her wary gaze alone. Her shoulders relax when I hold up the pre-packaged supply for Abigail.

“One spoon, brewed for thirty minutes. Tomorrow, brew for twenty minutes. The next, only ten—then onwards, half a spoon each day, brewed for five minutes. Do this until there is nothing left.” I hand it to her. “She will be weak and nauseas for days, but you must force her to drink clean water and eat bread, unbuttered.” At her glazed-over eyes, I add, “Do you need me to write this down?”

Mildred shakes her head numbly and stuffs the pouch in her skirt pocket. She hesitates and in that short moment, her dislike of me slips away from her like water down a window. She sees me. A healer. A helper. A witch who saves her child from death.

Mildred realises, I hadn’t been the one to harm Abigail. We are all to blame, yes. But I am the one to save her. That counts for something. It must.

Before she can reach for her money-pouch, I step away. “Think of it as an offer of amends.”



Sometime after Mildred’s departure, I returned to my chores on the wolfsbane. I packed the phials in my wicker basket with care, wrapped layers of cloth around them to stop them from breaking, then left for the Square with the basket on arm.

The morn is late enough for the villagers to be out, but the markets are scarce. Most villagers huddle and share woes, but as I walk by, silence steals their words. Some watch with hope at spotting my basket; others are dubious, their faith in me not yet settled.

The ordinaries should not fear. The wolf has his sights on me. The others should be safe, I imagine, if they bolt themselves away at night. Fortunate fools, yet they don’t know how fortunate they are.

Priest Peter is on the stone path across the Square. He offers blessings to those of the villagers riddled with fear. Then, his gaze finds me coming down the Square.

He cannot stop the breath of relief from leaving his lips. The cloudy puff of air appears at his mouth and the tension is torn from his body.

The altar boy takes the bowl of holy water from Priest Peter when I step onto the stone path. In its place, I push the wicker basket into his hands.

“There is enough for every household within the walls,” I say. “Tell everyone—do not let even a drop of this touch the skin. No matter how small, a mere drop can be lethal.”

Priest Peter nods and thanks me; his urgent tone is flooded with the same relief that lights up his creased eyes; “You have done a great service to the village, Ella. A gift from God stands before me.”

“I’m no gift. I stand before you because of my Grandmother, and how you chose to take me to her. God has no part in my being here.”

Shock slackens his jaw.

I tap the wicker basket. “That debt is now repaid.”

Priest Peter’s gape lasts a moment longer, then he snaps his mouth shut. “Very well,” is all he says.

I’m at the church longer than expected.

Priest Peter insisted I show him what to do with the wolfsbane. So, I spent thirty minutes with a brush damp with wolfsbane from a phial, and painted a translucent X over the doors, then coated the doorframe and windows.

Some crowds slipped closer to observe, and when I finished, I turned to see two dozen villagers had gathered to watch me.

As I left, two shook my hand; a woman offered me a pressed rose, wild to the northern lands; and a child sat on the train of my skirt. Inside, I wanted to boot the child away from me.

Pretence stopped me. It was needed, so I forced a smile on my face.

And as I walk home now, I wonder of their gratitude...

Perhaps I am better suited to the life of a needed pariah than a wanted member of this community.



## 18.

Skirt in my hands, I wade up the lane to my home. I look over my shoulder every other second, feeling eyes on me. But I see no one.

I move quicker, until I see Marigold at my door, waiting for me.

My expression switches from one of paranoia to apology. I have not yet made what she needs, and tonight is the full moon.

“Marigold,” I start. “I have been so busy with the demands of the Priest, that I have yet to acquire all the ingredients I need.”

Disappointment thins her lips and her hands tighten on a folded cloth in her grip.

“Could you manage another month?”

Her eyes are downcast as she says, “Please, I can wait for as long as it takes. I do not expect to be your only patron or concern, Ella. My gratitude to you is eternal.”

I give her a brisk nod. “Priest Peter has the supply of wolfsbane,” I tell her. “Use it before the sun falls.”

It’s all I can manage to say to her, the only words I can string together as I face her sorrow. Before me, she stands like a doll. The sort that rich children carry with them. Glass-eyes, fragile, and so easily broken.

Marigold is broken.

Her husband saw to that long ago, and recently—I see her cracks in front of me. Only, the cracks come in purple marks that disappear under the frilled neck of her dress, and the over-drawn rim of her hat.

I run my gaze over the blotches of purple and blue. “He is doing it again, isn’t he?” I whisper, my voice almost carried away in the stabs of air that pass us by.

Colour drains from her face and gathers at her marked throat. She looks away, my words too much for her to bear.

Is it not vile that she carries the shame that her husband should wear?

“Did you come for the brew?” I ask. “Or for something you are too afraid to ask for, Marigold?”

Still, she won’t look at me. Her averted face confirms all—she wants moss-salve to spread over her bruises, my own concoction to steal away all those marks within the day. But I offer her something greater.

From my coat pocket, I slip out a purple phial. It is wolfsbane, one of the two I keep on my person at all times, even before my discovery of the wolf’s identity.

I part with the phial and hand it to her. “Wolfsbane,” I say. “Have your husband smear it on the door, then wash his hands after. He must be the one to do this, Marigold. Calloused hands are far better for this particular brew.”

Wearing a frown on her face, she takes it with hesitation. Still, she takes it all the same and pockets it. The wrinkles at the corners of her eyes give away her mistrust, but she does not question me.

“It’s a special brew,” I tell her. “A strong one that I had planned to use for myself. I want you to have it.” A soft smile comes to my face and I rest my hands on hers. “After your husband has washed his hands, he might feel somewhat light-headed. Let him rest the night away. Be safe.”

“Thank you, Ella.” Her voice is a hushed tone loaded with dismay. She hoped for my salves and brews to steal away her bruises. She does not yet realise that I have offered her something far grander than remedies.

I offered her the cure.

The death of her husband shall be dismissed as an accident, a drunken moron too proud to wear gloves or use a brush. No one will mourn his death. Marigold will never speak of my deceit. And I will gladly dance on the monster’s grave ... If I am fortunate enough to out-live him.

Marigold sweeps down the lane, head bowed, and her shoulders hunched over.

I turn to my door, the promise of warmth and seclusion embracing me too soon.

Before I can go through the door, the rapid slam of footsteps rushes up the lane at me. I look over my shoulder and sigh a quiet sound of despair.

Johan, the hay stacker, runs up to me.

Orange hair a tousled mess, he staggers to a stop and blinks his green eyes wide. In his gloved hand, a blue phial of wolfsbane is grasped, and on the corner of his freckled lips is a smudge of jam.

“Red,” he wheezes, short on breath. “I hoped to catch you...”

He pauses to steady his breathing a moment.

Patiently, I wait, though inside I am itching to hide in my home away from the ordinaries.

“I wondered,” he says, “do you have the paste for teeth yet?”

“I have not had the time, Johan, and I am afraid I can offer none of what you need.”

“Not even the green paste for my son’s pimpled face?”

I shake my head.

“What about that sweet soap my wife likes ... the one with the nuts in it? She’s down to a crumb of the last bar.”

Grim-faced, I shake my head again. “My stores are low this moon.”

Johan curses under his breath and kicks the snow. Then, he gives me a look of fading hope that flickers under my stony stare. “Is...About that, uh, the lotion...for my rash...*you know where...*”

“I am sorry, Johan. I will work on your order after the full moon. Given the state of things of late, I simply haven’t had the time to work on anything other than wolfsbane.” I look at the phial in his hand and add, “I’m sure you can understand such changes in priority.”

A scowl twists his face. He aims the expression over my shoulder as if to suggest his grievances, but not to offend me so directly.

“Until next week, Johan,” I say.

He bows his orange-topped head and leaves.

At long last, I push through the door to my home.

Inside, I lean my shoulder on the door to shut it, then stay still a moment. My eyes droop shut as let the familiar warmth and isolation envelope me.

The moment is brief, for I know I must soon decide what to do about Colton.

How can I bargain with him, how can I ensure my safety?

An alliance could do the trick, but they are often built on a mutual benefit. There is little I can offer him in return, other than oils for his pained body and sore bones. It isn't enough. Perhaps—

My muddled thoughts are torn from my head.

Someone is behind me.

My eyes snap open, but not quick enough. *I* am not quick enough.

I'm snatched backwards, to the hinges of the door. A chest presses against my back, and the cool bite of a knife against my throat holds me in place.

Someone holds me at knife-point, and if I am horridly honest ... of all the ways my life could end, this is not one I had considered.



# 19.

The metallic scent wafts from the one behind me and sneaks up my nostrils. I smell his work on him.

Colton is the one behind me, the one to press the sharp edge of a knife to my neck.

Slowly, I trace my fingers up my dress and try to steady my breathing.  
*Be calm. Calmness clears the mind.*

It is easy to tell myself, but not as easy to listen.

A storm descends on my mind and travels through my body to my now-shaking limbs. My breath shudders, my fingers quake. I reach for the phial of wolfsbane in my corset, careful to move slow.

“Colton,” I say, my voice betraying my fear, hot and raspy. Broken. “This is ... this is silly, you know. I wouldn’t ever speak of it. I would never reveal your truth. We ... We are the same, aren’t we? They don’t understand us.”

I pull out the phial from my corset and clasp it in my clammy hand.

The blade bites closer to my throat where it pinches my skin. Warmth drips from the pinch. Droplets, the colour of what they call me, roll down to my dress.

Then, my entire body is seized with a hardness, and I cannot move.

“Stupid lass,” a woman spits at my ear. “You think you are special, different from the ordinaries, but you are one.” Her voice lowers, grows deeper into a venomous hiss. “You are a mockery of the true witch.”

The blade is so tight on my skin that blood trickles down to my dress in a steady stream—it could soon become a river.

“Who are you?” My voice rattles harder than my hand around the phial. “What do you want from me?”

“For you to die, whore.”

The blade drags to the side. I cry out and throw myself back.

The woman behind me grunts and stumbles, enough that I escape the slice of the blade on my throat. I right myself and whirl around. Before I can lock my wild gaze on her, a gleam of metal cuts across my vision.

I stagger back.

My hand slaps to my cheek. The burst of pain is so blinding, I drop the phial. It rolls to the door, but care not...I care only about the gush of blood from my face. It rushes down my arm.

But I see her.

Savage eyes, black hair so dark it shimmers like coal embers.

*“Catherine?”*

She snarls as I speak her name. Then she lunges forward, slicing the blade out at me again.

I cry out and stumble back. The knife just misses me.

I hold out my free hand, breathing hard. “Wait! Stop this! Catherine... we’re the same! You and I should not fight—”

My words are cut off with another swipe of the blade.

I fall back, boots caught on the skirt of my dress. The ground pulls out from under me and I land, hard, on the floor.

Just as she lunges at me, I roll to the door. She hits the ground beside me, a mere touch away.

Panicked, I scramble to my feet. Before I can even turn for the door, the blade whips by me. It sinks into the wood. I make to grab it—

My forehead is cracked against the door. She holds my hair and throws me to the side, as though I weigh little more than a cloth.

Catherine’s strength is her tell—she has chanted to Mother for strength.

A solid table catches me. I grunt, hands and face smeared in blood... my own and from the table of butchered animals. Though blood leaks into my eyes, I see the jar before me. Empty, other than the water trapped inside of it.

I snatch the jar and spin around just as she charges at me.

The jar shatters the moment I bring it down on her head.

Catherine staggers. Her hand reaches for the cut at her hairline.

Leaning back against the table, I kick out at her—she lands on her back.

Before she can get up, I am racing for the rear door. I don't look back. I run until I crash into the door so hard that all the air is punched from my insides. Never have I unbolted a door so fast in my life.

I swing it open as I hear her behind me—getting to her feet, grabbing the knife.

I lunge for the outside.

A solid wall blocks my way.

My breath catches and I look up from the brown leather wall before me, to a proud face and tousled auburn hair. His dirt-brown eyes harden as they rest on me, but a burst of panic is quick to brighten them.

Colton grabs me and shoves me inside. The force of his push sends me reeling to the back of the couch. I turn my wide eyes on him. But Colton looks not at me; he looks at Catherine—standing opposite him, bloody blade in her hand.

The savagery I'd seen in her eyes collapses to something else...

Shame.

"Mother," Colton says, aghast. "You promised you wouldn't."

The savagery might be gone from her eyes, but her voice is slick with it; "I cannot let you do this, son! Not with one like her—a *made witch*." She spits those words as though they poisoned her tongue. "She is a mockery of my kind, of your kind. There is no pure power in her ordinary body! I cannot abide this Colton."

Cupping my bleeding cheek, I stare at the crazed woman. Even through the spiralling chaos in my head, I wonder not only why she is so fuelled by her disdain for my sub-witch status, but how on earth she got into my home!

As if reading my scattered thoughts, she turns her sneer on me. "A real witch would know the answer to both."

Colton blinks and looks at me, as if fully grasping that I am here, that I am injured, that his mother tried to kill me.

Brown eyes swirl with the beginnings of a storm.

I swallow, hard. Some blood bitters the taste of my saliva.

Now, I will die by witch and wolf.



## 20.

Colton locks his eyes with mine.

Fear freezes me in place. A cage might as well be built around me, for my muscles don't yearn to flee—I can only stand, trapped, and watch his gaze churn.

Blade tight in her grip, Catherine takes another step forward. "Let me finish what I came here to do. Let me remove her scent from your path, her temptation away from your mind. A true wolf should mate only with a true witch. You know this, Colton. You have battled with this knowledge and disgust, and you have lost."

The throbbing agony in my cheek dulls to an ache. My dress is stained, cheek gushing still, and there is a gash on my neck above my collarbone. Yet, I hear her words as though they are my only pain.

*You have lost.*

Colton didn't come to end me last night. He does not want to kill me. My presence has lured him in, so much so that he can't deny his wolf's yearning any longer. Tonight, he came here with the intention of biting me.

Colton's plans for me are mateship.

Not if I have a say in the matter. And by Mother Nature, I do.

Quick as a rat, I jump over the back of the couch and race to the front door.

Colton's boots slam heavy behind me; Catherine sprints to cut me off at the door. One hunter to bite me, the other to kill me.

But neither of them run for their lives—their freedom. So I am faster.

I dive to the floor.

Blood makes my hands slippery. Still, I grab the phial of wolfsbane and lift it up—aimed at Colton. He stops in tracks, a metre or so from where I sit. Catherine skids to a stop so abruptly, she collides with a stand-table. Panic lights up her crazed eyes.

We are all still.

No one moves. We only share a moment of harsh breaths, rushed thoughts, and tense stares.

Then Colton raises his hands, slowly. “I will not harm you, witch. Put down the phial.”

My chest heaves with each ragged breath I take. The door keeps me upright as I sit, and the weight of my already tired arm fights against me. “I have never said this to anyone before,” I tell him. “But fuck you.”

He flinches, so small a reaction that I would not have noticed it if my gaze wasn’t pasted to his face.

“Are you so intent on killing me when I pose no threat to you?” he snarls.

“Oh, but you do. You are as much a threat to me as your crazy mother is. She wants to kill me—but you...” I shake my head. “You want to steal from me. You want to steal my choice over my life, my body. Over my corpse is when that day comes.”

Colton tightens his lightly freckled jaw.

Catherine watches, the fury burning within her shaky limbs.

I cannot hold this phial for much longer. Blood must pour from my face; a weak dizziness seeps into me and the fog returns to cloud my mind.

Colton finally looks at me. “I swear I will not bite you,” he says. “I promise you here and now, no bites shall bind us until you consent to our mateship.”

Catherine growls. She must confuse herself for a wolf. “You have lost your mind!” Her hand slams down on the table, knocking off an unlit lantern from the blow. “A made witch? Mere days ago you swore of how you will never fall victim to her like he did! Colton, you will hear me, boy.”

He does. Her voice turned so dark that it demanded both our gazes.

She points the blade at him. “A made wolf and a made witch belong together. If you do not leave her to him, I will end her, whether you abide it or not. Mark those words, for they are truer than anything you feel for this whore.”

I shove through the wooziness that drifts over me and frown. A made wolf. One who they know. One who succumbed to me.

I flinch as Catherine pulls away from the table. She moves only a step or so, but the point of the blade is fixed on me now. Confidence soars within her as my hand lowers an inch, my arm drooping. She sees that I weaken.

Grandmother. I need Grandmother. Her treatment, her presence. Lest I bleed out.

“What you feel for her,” says Catherine. “Made witch or not, it is not love. You stalk her in the woods, watch her in the Square because of her smell. A mere perfume from her gifted power. A trick, an illusion. Do not be fooled by tricks, son, for you are no fool.”

Dazed, I look at Colton.

He studies me with eyes that battle with his mother’s words. Instinct and logic are at war behind those eyes. Still, he considers my death, a part of him even wants it. I see that in his eyes.

Catherine sees it too.

A proud smirk slips over her lips and twists her cruel face. Her grip is tighter on the blade, confident, and she moves toward me.

Colton turns his cheek.

At first, I think he looks away to avoid watching my death, to grant his mother permission to end me. Then, I trace his gaze to the rear door.

The door is wide open, still. A man stands there, a dark silhouette of thick furs and coats. A man whose midnight eyes glitter from even afar.

My shriek rips through the house and tenses everyone. “Dante!”

Blood drips into my eyes but I blink it away. My hand drops to the floor, and not a second after, Dante has barged into the house and drawn his sword.

It happens so fast. All of it jumbles in my mind like scrambled eggs.

Across my home, I see a flash of yellow in Dante’s eyes—it’s gone before he whips off his cloak and the sword winks at me. Colton’s back is to me, but I see his fingernails—growing longer, darker, coarser. His growl is so deep it shudders the floorboards I slump on.

“Dante,” I urge, though my voice grows weaker. “He’s the wolf—”

Catherine flies at me.

She uses the distraction. I'm too weak to move, to jump from the path of the blade coming down at me. With a cry, I ram my fist up and shove the phial into her mouth. Then I kick out my feet—my boots smack into her stomach and send her reeling.

Catherine crashes into the table; they both collide to the floor. The shatter of the phial is unmistakable. It breaks in her mouth. It is the only sound I hear before her wails fill the house.

Colton roars.

I gasp and swerve my gaze to him; he rounds on me, polished-lemon eyes burning bright for my head. But then, Dante hurls himself over the couch and swings out his sword. It slices down Colton's arm. The wolf gives another savage howl, and turns on him.

Dante glances at me. "Go!" he bellows. "Get to your Grandmother's! *Now!*"

I listen.

The pair move in a blur that my hooded eyes cannot follow. Consciousness is drifting from me. Blood leaves my face. I am bleeding out. I am dying.

I manage to climb onto my feet and stagger out the rear door. A final glance back churns my stomach. Dante is knocked off his feet, the sword flies from his grasp, and Colton leaps over half the house to land before him. If I had the energy, I might've called out for him, helped him in some way.

Dante then proves, he needs my help not. A knight's son he is.

He is on his feet, another blade in hand—longer than my forearm—and hitting out at Colton with ease.

I turn my back on them and stumble up the lane to the wall. I head straight to the woods, and stop only when I am through my secret passage and on my knees in the snow.

My blood-stained hands pack snow before smacking it against my cheek. It should numb the pain a while. Then I am staggering through the

woods to the cabin, with a single prayer to the Goddess of Nature, the true Mother—

*Let me make it to Grandmother.*



# 21.

I am floating somewhere. Or nowhere.

Dark space is all around me. I lay flat on eternal space and gaze up at nothing.

It's calm here.

Not peaceful, not soothing. It just...is.

I might like it here, if I remembered what 'like' was, how it felt. But I don't. I have forgotten.

Then, it dawns on me. I am not floating in nothing.

I *am* nothing.

I find it is rather serene.



## 22.

A face breaks through the darkness.

*Grandmother.*

Her lips move, she speaks to me, but I hear muffled sounds rather than her voice. My shoulders rattle and I suspect she is shaking me.

Grandmother's face turns cross and snaps in a distant, far-away voice; "Wake up, girl. Wake up, wake up—*now, Ella!*"

A breath tears through me.

My body arches up as my lungs suck in as much air as they can hold. Grandmother pushes me back down with all her might—and she is mighty. With a grunt, I am still again on a ... mattress.

I jerk up once more and scan the room. Darkness is gone, replaced by Grandmother's cabin.

She slams me back down. "I said wake up," she snaps. "Not sit up."

My dazed vision finds her, perched on the mattress edge.

"Grandmother," I utter. "What...happened?"

With a tut, she grabs a goblet from the bed-table and forces some down my throat. I am practiced enough not to retch, but it tastes worse than the magic-transfer goop she served me last. Bitterness clings to my tongue, but at the back of my mouth a sour tang settles. A shudder runs through me.

Yet, each drop of the pungent brew wipes away a wisp of the fog in my head. It is slow work, but effective. Only once I have finished the entire goblet's fill does Grandmother answer me.

"I found you on the path," she says.

It might be her mysterious brew that confuses me, but she almost sounds concerned. If I had the energy within me, I would scoff at my foolishness.

Grandmother rests her hand on mine. It feels odd to the pair of us. She pulls it away and touches it to her chest instead.

“Your death came to me,” she says, tapping her fingers against her breastplate. “Here—Your pain filled me and grief blossomed. So, I ventured out to the woods to find you. A good thing I did, too, or you would have bled out in the snow. I have been feeding you brew all day.”

I let my eyes flutter shut as the morn’s pain consumes me.

Grandmother wipes my forehead with a damp rag. I wince when she dabs down to my sore cheek. Then I remember what I did to the one who cut me there.

My eyes open and find Grandmother. “I killed her. The other witch.”

“Dearest Ella. Did you think I did not know? Her energy passed by me hours ago. You would have felt it too if you hadn’t fainted in the woods.”

“Grandmother, this is nothing to dismiss.” I look at her as she wipes at my throat sweat. “Her son, Colton...he’s the wolf. To avenge his mother, he will come find me.”

My gaze follows her as she wrings out the rag in a bowl of water, then places it on a flower-patterned dish. “Colton has been a wolf of sound mind since his birth,” she tells me. “Never has he killed anyone. He hunts under the moon in the woods, but no more than he needs to.”

Shock almost takes me. It begins to seep into my veins, but then I frown at her. Of course she would know Colton is the wolf. She knew Silas, who he married, who Catherine gave life to. For nineteen years, she knew and never once did she tell me.

She reads my thoughts: “I never thought it necessary to tell you, Ella. A wolf’s identity is not mine to share, and he kept to himself. Your dislike and mistrust of him was solid enough without my meddling.”

Despite her words, a sting of betrayal cuts behind my chest, as sharp as Catherine’s blade to my cheek.

“How could you not warn me?” I ask, stunned. “All this time, you could have at least told me to be wary of him.”

“Warn you,” she repeats, a smile of pity on her lips. “Warn you of what, Ella? A peaceful, forest-dwelling wolf? Colton never sought revenge for his father. He came to me for answers one day. I offered them, he listened, then he left.” She shrugs and looks at the drapes that separate the

bedroom from the front area. “The hunter is a wise wolf, ruled by his human mind, not his animal one. Emotion has no drive in him.”

“*I killed his mother.* Granted, she tried to kill me—” I gesture to my wounded face. “—But it’s his mother. Colton wants revenge. You did not see him when I did... when I took her life. He was going to tear my head off my body, and would have done if Dante hadn’t stopped him.”

For once, Grandmother truly listens to me. Her eyes rinse me over a long moment, then she nods firmly. “I will prepare. You, stay a while in bed. We have some time.”

Grandmother rises from the mattress and gathers the cleaning dishes and rags from the bed-table. Before she leaves, I stop her at the drapes:

“Grandmother...” I swallow; the sour tang still lingers at the back of my mouth. “Catherine spoke of another wolf before her death. A made wolf, she called him.”

Grandmother looks at me over her shoulder. “Colton must have bitten someone,” she says. “To make another wolf takes great restraint, yet a great loss of control.”

“This made wolf ... I think he is my lover. Dante Bennett.”

Her eyebrows lift at the arches. “The Knight’s son?”

Stiffly, I nod and shift in the bed. “The very one.”

Her gaze is firm on me. I frown at her knowing look. Then, Grandmother tells me to rest and leaves through the drawn drapes.

I roll onto my side and hug a pillow.

An emptiness carves itself inside of me, a hole in my gut where my organs should rest. The times I laid with Dante, I can forgive. Those were transactions, simple business. Last night was neither of those things.

A part of me blossomed a feeling last night, though I only realise it now. It is one I don’t understand or recognise, yet I feel it as fresh and strong as my wounds. It could be what causes the empty sensation inside of me.

I wonder, is this pain?

It is stronger than the pain of flesh and bones, yet different in some way.

I shake off the thoughts, but they do not leave my head. They are stuck to inside of my skull, where they nest and breed tenfold.

Isn't it so wretched that I know not of his fate? Colton could have well killed him. Dante could have escaped. Perhaps they are both on my floor like Catherine.

There, but gone.

Either way, Dante is in my head to stay.



## 23.

Grandmother gave me a half-hour in bed before she forced me out. “Sunset is within the hour,” she told me. “Reasonable or not, wolves will be here tonight if either survived. While I hope for the best, we must prepare for the worst.”

Soon after, I am dressed in a corset-less dress and I paint blades with wolfsbane. Grandmother fills a bucket with the poison, then we coat the windows and doors with it. We finish these chores with ten minutes to spare.

I stand by the window and watch the orange seep into the sky behind the clouds. Sunset is near. Ten minutes...

The longest ten minutes I have ever suffered.

Colton plagues my mind. Despite Grandmother’s assurances, the glow of his wolf-eyes haunts my mind. There was murder in those eyes, bloodlust. If he lives, he seeks revenge.

At the end of it, he is a wolf. A wolf can only be so rational, so reasonable.

Does the same apply to Dante?

He is a made wolf, I suspect. What that means for me, I cannot imagine.

Still, I know our times were of the Witch Lure, not of real desire, not of natural want, and not of our bonded minds. I loathe to think why that pains me so, but it does.

This isn’t love.

At least not the sort that rattles one’s mind, body and soul. To Dante, I shall never fall to pregnancy. I could kill him to save my own life without hesitation. What I feel for him is not a Hemlock woman’s love. But should that mean it isn’t love at all?

Grandmother shatters my thoughts to pieces. At the window on the other side of the fireplace, she stands and looks through the drapes. Her

voice is a whisper when she speaks and ends the ten minutes we waited through:

“Someone is coming.”

My fingernails dig into the wooden windowsill.

A man, hunched in a fur coat, limps up the path. He moves quickly for an injured man. One of his hands disappears behind his coat, as if to press against an injury.

Heart beating in my throat, I study him hard. It could be Colton, it could be Dante. It could be a complete stranger. Then, he comes close enough to the cabin and I notice the golden hem of his gloves.

I rush to the door, and before Grandmother can stop me, I shove it open.

The cold beats against me, but I race down the stairs to meet Dante.

“Heavens,” I say and touch my hand to his cheek.

He tries to turn away from me, but my grip hardens. Blood smears over his jaw, dries his hair together in clumps, and coats his lips.

“Come inside, quickly. The sun is setting.”

Dante leans against the stairs’ barrier. His fingers curl around my wrist and peel my hand from his face.

“Red.” He breathes my name as if it will be his last word. “I need you to listen to me a moment. Please—” His grip on my wrist tightens as I make to speak. “Please, Red. If I do not survive the night, I must have you know the truth.”

My gaze tries to find his under the drawn hood. He avoids me on purpose, to hide his eyes from mine.

“I did not mean to,” he says from behind his veil of shadows. “I am sorry—I am the one who killed the widow.”

I yank my wrist from his grasp, then tug down his hood.

My breath catches at the sight of him. Before, even with the hood drawn, I could see the blood on the lower half of his face, and on the hair that curls at his temples. Now, I see the gash across his forehead, the cut down his eyebrow, the swelling of his left eye.

Gently, I cup his face and guide his ashamed gaze to mine.

“Dante, I know.”

The pad of my thumb brushes over his cut lip.

I am afraid of him, but in this moment as he stands before me in a sickly state, I am suddenly flooded with warmth within.

These injuries befell him because he chose to fight Colton—to *save me*.

“It was something Catherine said about another wolf,” I tell him. “I figured ... it came to me that you are the other wolf, as though a part of me had known it all along.”

Dante brings his hand up to mine, and rests it there a moment. “Never did I wish to frighten you, or harm you, or in any way drive you from this place,” he says. “The widow...”

His eyes drift down to the snow at our feet.

“The widow began a petition among the villagers to have you exiled. I feared she would gain support—enough to summon a witch hunter to our parts. I couldn’t...” He shakes his head and touches his gaze to mine. “I could not allow such a horror to befall you, Red. I killed her, knowingly and willingly, as the beast that I am.”

“You are no beast,” I spit. “You are a brave Knight.”

Dante’s lips lift to the side, as though he means to smile. But before the smile can settle, his face soon twists in pain and he shoves me away from him.

“Go inside,” he groans. Something snaps inside of him, a rib I think, and the agony brings him to his knees. “Inside!”

I watch, horrified, as his head throws back and out from his bloodied lips comes a howl, so charged with pain that I feel the echoes of it run through my aching bones.

“Dante, you will not hurt me.” I step closer to him, but he swipes at me—with a hairy hand and *claws*. “You are yourself in wolf-form, no? So what danger could you pose to m—”

“Colton.”

The name is hissed through his clenched teeth; his eyes roll back as another snap brings him closer to the snow.

“Colton is coming ... for you, Red.”

He spoke the words too late.

A savage roar tears through the woods. I jerk back and look, wide-eyed, to the path. A wolf, brown and thick-furred, charges up to the cabin. There is blood on its jaw, its lemon-yellow eyes glow with the hunger for my blood, and it bounds toward me as it would a fleeing deer.

Before I can reach for Dante, a burst of fabric explodes in front of me. A confetto of clothes smothers the air—scraps of Dante’s clothes. In his place, is a wolf, the same primitive glow in his eyes and teeth bared at the one coming up the path.

I gasp and scramble up the stairs. Their roars send chills down my spine.

Grandmother snatches me inside before I can run in myself, and the door slams shut behind us. All that’s left are the sounds of teeth tearing flesh apart outside.

Dante, fighting to protect me again, has been abandoned by the one he tries to save.



## 24.

Their battle rages on for hours. There are times when silence blankets the cabin, and I move to approach the window and look outside. Those times pass by so quickly that I wonder if they were in fact dreams that took me away in the long night.

Howls call out, rich with the pain of torn flesh. Whimpers are high-pitched enough to pierce through the walls of the cabin. At each sound, I flinch and pray to the ultimate Mother that none of those cries belong to Dante. Fear flows through me for him, but for myself too.

Should Colton come bursting through the door I face, my first thought will not be of Dante and his sacrifice. It will be of Grandmother—and myself. Just as she sacrificed much of her life to me, I shall sacrifice all of my life to her.

So, I stand at the wall opposite the door with a phial of wolfsbane in one hand and a dagger in the other. Grandmother chants by the fire, whispered words to our Mother to bring unto us protection.

This is our night.

Hours of chanting, hours of waiting, hours of gurgled sounds outside—howls choked in blood. Until the howls are no more, and there is only silence.

It takes a good while before I decide to look through the window. Dawn is not yet upon us—whatever wolf might still be outside could break through with ease. Yet, the silence calls to me.

“Ella, no.”

Halfway to the window, I stop and look at Grandmother. On the armchair, she sits in her prayer position (hands above her head, palms upwards, wrists overlapped, and her knees drawn to her chest with her ankles crossed). She pauses her chants to stop me.

“Stay inside until dawn touches the earth,” she tells me.

I hesitate, my whole body still with the silence outside these walls. Grandmother knows best. It’s what I’ve always believed. Yet, there is a

twist of unease in my stomach, a tug that wants me closer to the window.

For once, I obey myself over Grandmother.

I rush to the window and peel the curtain to the side.

The garden looks like a wonderland in the dead of night. That is the first thing I notice as I drag my gaze over the snow. Moonlight floods the ground with a glow—pools of blood shimmer in the light.

Two wolves lay apart, both are down. Both are unmoving.

I'm out the door before Grandmother can stop me.

The closest wolf to me is dead. I kneel at its side and check for a heartbeat. Nothing. Only eyes that stare ahead, empty and devoid of any glimmer of life. Much of its brown coat is dusted in snow.

I rush to the second wolf. Like the other, its coat—as brown as fresh soil—wears the damp spots of snow. But this one breathes. It lays on its side, and an unsteady rise and fall of its ribs catches my attention. I look into its eyes. It sees me, barely. But when it does, it gives a whine so faint that my heart writhes in my chest.

There is no way to tell which wolf is who. For all I know, the wolf at my knees is Colton. But then, it could well be Dante. Though he is dying, he not yet dead. Perhaps I can save him. Perhaps I can tend to him.

Can I risk myself to save the wolf before me?

The creak of the door pulls me from my thoughts.

Grandmother leans against the doorframe, pale under the moonlight, shadows in her eyes. "If you must," she calls to me, "be quick about it."

That's all the motivation I need.

I run into the house for supplies, then drag them to the wolf outside. Once I wedge a board beneath him—which earns hoarse, choked sounds of pain from him—I coil a rope around the board and heave him to the house.

It is hard work. Before I even reach the stairs, my muscles cry out in protest, and a particular spot beneath my shoulder blade shudders. To tow him inside, I chant words to Mother for strength. These chants are not always effective. It is more faith than practice. Grandmother's forte versus mine.

My faith is restored some when I have the wolf on the workbench, and I'm rummaging through Grandmother's stores to gather the right salves.

She helps me for a while. The better part of an hour, even. But she cannot hide it from me so late into the night. Her shaky hands, the coarse coughs that jolt her body. Grandmother really is sick.

I send her off to bed and tend to the wolf on my own.

On his back alone, there are three deep gashes to be healed. Punctures dot along his neck, a chunk is missing from his ear, and even his rear left leg is fractured.

I do it all myself, and I chant to Mother the whole time. This wolf needs Mother. He needs a miracle. Fortunately for him, I am a miracle with my salves and brews.

I only pause in my work when the wolf speaks to me. A deep sound that rumbles through him. It draws me to its eyes—they are open and watch me. Really watch me.

The wolf is conscious, aware, and gazing at me, though dazed.

My hand finds its cheek.

"I hope you are Dante," I whisper. "Otherwise, I will undo all of this work and drive a phial of wolfsbane down your throat."

The wolf blinks.

At first, I think he means to confirm that he is who I want him to be. But his eyes drift shut once more and they do not open again.

Sleep takes him from the pain.



## 25.

I wake in the armchair.

Candlelight flickers over the walls with the sapphire touch of the lantern encasing it. My fists find my eyes where they rub away all the crust that has gathered during my rest. It is hard to tell how much time has passed since I dragged the wolf into the cabin.

The wolf.

I wrench my hands from my face and squint at the herb table. Where the wolf had laid when I rested my eyes, is now a man's body. He sits on the edge of the table and combs his fingers through his dark hair. Small muscles etch into his scarred chest—fresh scars from the battle outside. A milky complexion coats his body and his dark hair is tousled with pieces of grass and a twig through the strands.

My heart catches in my throat; I rise from the armchair, my slow and delicate movements a lie of the relief that flows through me.

“Dante.”

At the sound of my whisper, he looks up at me from beneath his long lashes. The sparkle is gone from his eyes, and in its place is a weary pain.

The shaky breath that escapes me cannot be stopped.

Dante slips off the table in all his nudity, and strides toward me.

“Ella,” he says and pulls me against him. His nose finds the crook of my neck, where his hot breath caresses my skin in a familiar kiss. “Ella.”

Why he repeats my name, I do not know—until it settles within me. The warmth that comes with my true name on his lips. Not Red. Not Sorceress. Healer, Gift, Made Witch. I am Ella.

Despite the urge that takes me to melt into his arms, I detach myself from him and draw away. My treacherous gaze runs him over, a mixture of awe, desire and fear brewing within me.

Dante is reluctant to let go. His fingers graze from my wrist to my hand, but then he, too, draws away and leaves some space between us. In

that space, our doubts swarm.

“Do not fear me,” he says—no, he pleads with me in his gentle voice that aches for my touch. “I never meant to hurt anyone, Ella. Least of all you.”

It takes a second for me to realise what he speaks of. Dante hurt me, not with bites or claws that ribbon my flesh. No, he hurt me in other ways; ways just as painful as physical wounds.

At the reminder, my hand goes to my chest. Behind my skin, the ache burns stronger and spreads down to the emptiness in my gut.

“Why didn’t you tell me?” I ask, unable to meet his gaze. “I might have helped you, I might have...”

Done what? There is no cure for wolf-venom. There is nothing I could have done.

Dante has no answer for me. He holds out his hand and echoes all he can; “I didn’t want this, Ella. I wanted never to harm you in any way. For that, I am sorry.”

I hesitate. His offered hand tempts me, not unlike the way my Witch Lure tempts him. And that is what this is. Lures and lies.

“This is your wolf talking, Dante. What you think you feel for me ... it isn’t true.”

A smile takes his lips. “Then let us live lies together.”

I blink at him.

“Aren’t we liars and murderers? Why not be true to ourselves and in each others’ arms?”

I’m struck with an odd sensation. A strange feeling that warms me, so much so that it fills the void in my stomach. I think Dante sees me. That horrid, putrid darkness within me.

I think he likes it, whether it is his wolf-urge or not, Dante likes *me*.

“I will never allow you to bite me,” is all I say.

Hand still outstretched, he wiggles his slender fingers and says, “Then let me touch you.”

I do.

The moment my palm rests on his, I am yanked against his bare body. Predictable as he is, his nose finds its place at my neck, then travels up to my jaw. My eyes flutter shut as he nears the healing gash on my cheek. A chaste kiss touches beside the cut.

“Dante.” The stiff quiet of my voice threatens to break our moment. And it shall, for our moment must be broken before we let it carry us into a fantasy land. “We cannot be together. You must know that. Our secrets should remain so in the village.”

Arms tense around me, a new cage that holds me to him. “Why must you speak such truths, Ella? We are liars. Let us be so.”

Dante brushes a final kiss against my temple, then I am cold and without him against me. It is time for him to leave. He tells me with the way he averts his gaze, and how he searches for his clothes while he knows well that they were shredded in his change to wolf.

I take a fur cloak from the back of the armchair and offer it to him. It is the only piece of clothing that might fit him, and as he shrugs it on, I see that it hangs low enough to cover much of his nakedness, but his ankles and feet show under the hem.

Dante gives me that wink of his, but this time it is tainted.

*We* are tainted.

Before he leaves, he speaks last words that stay with me;

“To live our lies would be sweet like honey, Ella. Sweet enough to catch us both, bitter enough to keep us there.”



## 26.

For a while, I stand in the herb room, staring at the door he disappeared through. Seconds or minutes have ticked by before I drag myself to the door and push it aside.

The woods have swallowed him up already.

I wonder how he returns to his manor-house at the high hill of the village. Does he have a passageway like I do? A way to move in and out of the walls without detection?

With a sigh, I shove thoughts of him from my mind and look at the brown lump in the garden. Colton's wolf-corpse, buried by a thick layer of snow and covered with the morn mist.

Grandmother comes around the side of the cabin from the herb garden.

She pulls an axe alongside her, the blade of it scraping through the snow.

"Grandmother." I hurry down the steps to cut her off at the wolf-corpse. "Must we dismember him? A burial might suffice."

"Girl, knock off your silliness." She taps me on the head; I flinch. "We must cut off his head. Beheading a wolf is the way it is done."

I kick the snow-lump, hard. "He looks dead to me, Grandmother. Decapitation won't make him any more dead."

Grandmother steadies me with a sharp glare. "It is *deader*, for future reference, and you couldn't be more wrong. For a wolf's soul to leave its corpse, it must return to human form. Beheading the beast is the only way to allow the body to turn human again. The head will forever remain that of the wolf."

Silas' body in a cage springs to mine, and his wolf-head on a pike.

"If you insist." I take the axe from her, not because I feel I should be the one to chop up a wolf that my emotions are tangled for—but because Grandmother is poorly and weak.

With a studious look, Grandmother watches me. Then, she demands, “Today, you will take his head to the village and announce that you were the one to kill him. I will burn the body.”

My grim face doesn’t meet hers.

As Grandmother sets to stacking firewood, I unearth the wolf from the snow.

When he is completely free of snow, I have no other ways to delay what must be done. I bring the axe down on his neck. It takes five hits before it is completely severed. Either the axe is blunt, or it is harder to behead a wolf than I had expected.

As I ram a pike into his open throat, I let the bud of grief blossom within me.

In a way, I harbour a flicker of sorrow for his death. Yet, I know it was it best for me to let him die.

Colton’s actions were villainous. Mine were too.

We both wear our cruelties and evils. He was no better than me.

Still, to save myself I dismember him, help Grandmother burn his limbs piece by piece, then I trek through the woods to the village Square.

It is midday when I stab the pike into the soft snow at the church’s front.

For a while, I stand beside it, my grip firm on the pike—for all to know who ended the wolf. A lie. Just as Dante tells me, to live our lies is sweet like honey.

Villagers leak out from their homes. Small trickles of people that soon turn into rivers flowing through the lanes, until they swarm me in a crescent-shape. And in front of me, the Priest stands. He wears the same expression of every other ordinary around me.

Awe-struck. Inspired. Terrified.

With a mere glance at the wolf-head, they know that it is *the* wolf. Regular wolf-heads aren’t the size of a man’s torso. They don’t have bright yellow eyes or fangs longer than fingers.

Perhaps I am despicable. For when Priest Peter finally reacts and applauds me, and cheers erupt all around me, I smile.

Colton wanted to remove me, to take me away from the village and tear out my throat. But in his death, he has done the opposite.

Colton has secured my place in the village.

Now, thanks to him, I belong.



## 27.

### Four Months Later

Grandmother fought me to the bones. Whether it had been her pride or her deep-rooted disdain for the village, she couldn't abide my insistence that she move in with me.

Still, in her poor health Grandmother finally relented. It took only three months of my badgering for her to agree. Now, she lives to pester me whenever I am home. I'm not home often.

I spend my days in the apothecary shop I stole from the physician (Dante might have helped with the cost). Out back, I replanted most of the herbs and flowers from the garden at the cabin. It is protected by a tall fence of its own, next to the privy, and upstairs is my new home above the medicine store.

Grandmother had more than a few words about my purchasing a shop in the Square. It might be because we are from different bloodlines, one true witch and one made witch, but she doesn't understand my need to belong. In opening the shop, it wasn't to help others. I would be lying if I said otherwise. My shop is built on the foundations of my selfish needs—to be one of them.

Do not misunderstand me. By no means would I ever want to be ... *an ordinary*. I merely want to live among them.

To do so, I must act like them.

Tonight is two moons before the full one. Superstitions still cling to the villagers, despite the wolf-head encased in a glass box outside the church. Priest Peter is as Grandmother told me once. Theatrical.

Theatrics or not, the village shuts down on these few nights a month. The ordinaries think the woods free of the wolf. Fear of more coming still lingers.

I close the shop before dusk falls upon us and check on the garden.

Behind my own private garden, I keep a piece of my old home. The loose wooden boards in the walls. Dante will come through the slats once he is satisfied with his roam through the woods.

Upstairs, I find Grandmother on her favourite armchair by the fireplace. The flames are low, almost drowned to embers. When she is at her weakest, she often forgets to tend to the fire. It only assures me that I made the right decision in bringing her to the village with me.

After I build a strong fire that floods the apartment with warmth, I boil water in the kettle and unwrap one of my rarer soaps.

Grandmother's gaze traces my every move, rather reminding me of a wild animal sedated. It isn't until I am pouring the hot kettle-water into a washbowl that she protests with a cough.

"You must be washed." My voice is firm and my gaze harder still. "I won't quarrel the matter."

As Grandmother cared for me when I was a vulnerable child, I care for her in her old, brittle state. It is the law of nature. It is what I owe her, and—most of all—it is what I need to do out of my love for her.

She stirs in the armchair.

Perched on the table opposite her, I notice a small smear of blood at the corner of her parched lips. "Have you been drinking water, Grandmother?"

Grandmother mutters choked words that I do not hear. Though, I understand her clearly. A proud woman, a fierce witch, turned an ailing cripple who must be cared for by her own child. And that is what I am, is it not?

As much as I am her Granddaughter, I am her daughter.

She is my mother.

I carry the warm water to her and rest it on the table beside the armchair. With the black soap bar (made from goat's milk, almond oil, and charcoal), I wet a cloth and rub it until soap suds run down my wrist.

Predictable woman. She fights me at first, but relents only after I have washed her arm. Her pride loathes the circumstance, yet she knows well enough to enjoy clean skin.

After her wash, which leaves her smelling of fresh almonds, I feed her.

Tonight, she hardly finishes her small meal of pulverised potatoes and soft lamb strips, stewed to the ultimate tenderness. Grandmother leaves more in the bowl than she ate. Each passing day, her dwindling appetite wounds me more and more.

“Here.” Grandmother’s voice is a whispered croak, rife with soreness. She hands me her small pocketbook. “I am in the mood for history.”

I take the book and kneel at Grandmother’s feet. From the light of the fire, I see the scrawled words of which Hemlock women have jotted down from time to time.

This is not *the book*, but it is *a book* of our people.

I read her the story of her first daughter. Sometime during, Dante’s wolf-howl can be heard from afar. An echo of him, deep into the woods. Far enough that those in the village who hear it, will think it little more than an ordinary wolf.

I move on to the next story she favours—Her own.

When it comes to the part where I am introduced, her hand reaches down and touches my cheek. The smile on my face cannot be helped. With that one touch to the horrid, twisted scar on my face, she tells me she loves me—she tells me that I am still beautiful to her.

She is wrong of course.

The scar tugs my skin and warps it in a jagged line from the corner of my eye to above my jawline. It does not bother me, Grandmother thinks it is a scar of my history that I should wear proudly (to overcome a true witch), and Dante... Well, he cares the least about the scar. I rather think he is fond of it at times.

A foolish wolf under a spell.

†††

Dawn seeps through the dusty windows and wakes me. I must have forgotten to close the shutters. My neck is stiff, my spine aches, and I realise—I had fallen asleep at Grandmother’s knees last night.

I draw away and roll my shoulders. A satisfying *pop* comes from the left, and then I crane my neck in hopes of the same relief. A night's sleep at the foot of an armchair does harm to my muscles, but a night's sleep in an armchair will do worse to Grandmother.

Wiping at the crust on my eyes, I squint up at her.

Soundly, she sleeps. Still, silent, and calm.

I shake her shoulders. "Grandmother, it is time to wake."

She sinks further into the armchair, heavy and limp.

"Grandmother?" I shake her again, harder. "Wake up. It is dawn."

Grandmother shakes. She moves with me, but not on her own. Her eyes don't open, she doesn't pull away from me.

I freeze and study her motionless face; her motionless neck where her vein should pulse and push against her skin.

My hands shake. I touch my fingers to her neck.

I draw back to the floor.

My gaze doesn't leave her peaceful face. For a long while, I kneel at her feet and stare at her. Soon, her face distorts as though fog has settled over it—for the first time in my life, I shed tears and they warp her in my sight.

Salt droplets roll down my cheeks. Not many, mere trickles, but inside my heart weeps. *Grandmother is gone*. It doesn't sink in. It doesn't settle in my brain, it refuses to become a truth.

I am so entrenched in the moment that I can't bring myself to look away. Not even when the floorboard creaks behind me. Dante, naked, in my home and searching for his clothes.

Still, I kneel at Grandmother's feet, eyes on her slack features.

Dante comes closer to me. He slips into the tension with ease and crouches behind me on the floor. His hands find my arms, where they rest a long while.

I stay at Grandmother's feet.

Dante does not leave.



**28.**

## Epilogue

Grandmother's death has not gotten easier for me. Three weeks later, and I still make to speak to her as I brew concoctions and stir soup. Sometimes, I turn to the armchair as though I expect to see her sitting there, reading from a book, or knitting herself a pair of stockings.

Three weeks, and each time I expect her to be there, she never is.

I had a weak moment. In the book—*The Book*—there is a ritual... A ritual so dark that, if Grandmother was alive still and caught me looking at it, she would beat me with the book. I almost brought her back.

Of course, it would not have been her. I know this. Her energy has passed, moved beyond this word and through the veil. But I want her back here on this side of the veil with me. Until Grandmother abandoned my soul, I never truly realised how alone I am.

There is Dante. In a sense, I have him. But he is no Grandmother. He is not family. He is a wolf, spellbound.

Dante helped me bury Grandmother under her favourite flowers in the garden (dog-roses). Since that night, the roses have grown lusher than ever before. She must have had a little magic in her before her last breath.

I am in the garden now as dawn kisses the horizon. My fingers run over the soil that embrace Grandmother for eternity. But I am interrupted when the wood panels opposite slide to the side.

I look up; the wolf-in-human-skin slips through the gap and drags something behind him. An animal, hunted and killed.

Dante gives me a wolfish grin and heaves the animal behind him into my garden. Then he shuts the panels and secures them.

My gaze runs over the carcass. "A red stag," I say and wipe my hands on my blue skirt. "You impress me."

As nude as the day he was born, Dante stretches out his muscles and flexes his joints. After his turns, his body aches all over. He brings me prizes—today, the red stag—and I tend to his pain.

He crouches beside me and touches a fleeting kiss to my temple. "My lady asked for antlers, so antlers she will have."

“Your lady?” I push to my feet and arch my brow at him. “I am not your wife, Dante. I am your ... companion.”

“So be my wife,” he says with a wink. “And let us squabble within marriage.”

I do what I always do when he proposes marriage; “Name the day, and we’ll wed.”

Dante never names the day. We will never wed.

To hide from the truth that dares slip into our time together, Dante kisses me on the lips, as softly as he can manage after a turn. I swat him away.

“You have horrid breath and smell most wretched. Have you rolled in a dung patch of late?”

“Less complaining, more bathing me,” he demands.

I roll my eyes and lead him up to my home. In his human body, he has more trouble heaving the stag up the wooden stairs, but he manages. And as he always does, he dumps the prize in my herb room to be butchered later.

I boil water for his bath; the oils are already laid out on a tray to be massaged into him afterwards. Dante comes up behind me at the fireplace and wraps his arms around me. Together, we watch the flames lick up the base of the pot and wait for the water to bubble.

Today is not a day for my brews, concoctions or remedies. I do not open my shop on the days of full moons, and I cook enough to prepare for how demanding Dante is.

This time of month, his needs burn stronger than ever.

We have our agreement.

The full moon comes closer, and this is when his want to be around me heightens. After the moon, he will return to his home and there will be a fortnight in which we do not speak or touch.

Tonight, we touch and speak.

There will never be another future ahead of us.

Our lies are all we have and we need to live within that deadly comfort ... two weeks out of every month.

**The End.**

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## NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

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Thank you for reading RED RUN, a darker re-imagining of the old fairy tale, and the first in the FEARED FABLES series.

If you have enjoyed this read, reviews can be left on the Amazon page and Goodreads. For self-published works, reviews are the life-lines needed, whether blunt or detailed, positive or negative. I hope to read your feedback!

The second instalment of the FEARED FABLE series is due for release late-2018, after the wrap-up of THE PLAGUE series.

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